











**SEERS AND SING-  
ERS : A STUDY OF  
FIVE ENGLISH POETS  
By ARTHUR D. INNES**

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*'We come then to that great concourse of the Dead,  
not merely to know from them what is true, but  
chiefly to feel with them what is just.'*

RUSKIN.

*'All inmost things, we may say, are melodious ;  
naturally utter themselves in song. . . . It is a  
man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him  
a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically ;  
the heart of Nature being everywhere music, if you  
can only reach it.'*

CARLYLE.



To E. F. H.

*BECAUSE I knew you, when I most  
Had need of light, so light was given,  
And through the gathered cloud-rack riven  
The moon broke, and the starry host,*

*Because no greatest gift I brought  
Were answer for a gift so great,  
Nor is it mine to compensate  
The grace you gave and knew it not—*

*This gift, so slight, I pray you take,  
Seeing it pleased me just to show  
Some smallest hint of all I owe,  
Accept it for the giving's sake.*

*A. D. I*



## P R E F A C E



PREFACE, like ‘grace before meat,’ is, according to some views, better dispensed with altogether, and should in any case be as brief

as possible : but the present volume calls for a short explanation.

The papers of which it is composed appeared in the *Monthly Packet*. The first was written without any idea of a continuous series ; but the marks of welcome it received—as unexpected as they were pleasant—led to other papers

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following, more or less indefinitely connected, and finally to a regular series. To give the whole something of the unity of a book, some alteration and rearrangement has been necessary, and I am aware that the scrappiness and the separateness involved in the manner of their original production must still to no small extent attach to them ; and for this I would crave the consideration of my readers.

The papers were written while Tennyson was still living ; and I have thought it best to leave the references to him as they originally stood.

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## **SEERS AND SINGERS**



## I

## CHARACTERISTICS



DO not propose, in this volume, to take my readers far afield, to range over many lands and many centuries, to propound any new and startling theories, or to introduce any hitherto unknown poets. But there is a certain bookshelf reasonably well within reach of my hand when my feet are on the fender ; and when there are books on such a shelf they are apt to be read with comparative frequency. Some of the volumes get changed from time to time, but others are pretty permanent ; and among the latter are

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CHARAC- included the works of Wordsworth,  
TERISTICS Browning, and Tennyson.

Much has been said, and sometimes superlatively well said, about them all. But to one who loves the poets, it is generally pleasant to talk of them with another who shares, or may be led to share, his love: and therefore I hope some will be found to take pleasure in this book, which aims after all at being a sort of one-sided conversation.

It so happens, moreover, that by taking these three poets together, the task of getting at what I should like to say about them is rendered comparatively easy. They were contemporaries, inasmuch as both the younger poets had produced much of their most characteristic work before Wordsworth died. They were alike in this, that each had a strong religious element in his view of life. If a fourth name were added—that of Shelley—it is probable that most readers of poetry would say that for them one or other of the four has been the most important poetic influ-

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ence, since Milton at any rate. But CHARAC-TERISTICS Shelley occupies a position so unlike the others, that to include him in what might perhaps be best described as a study in comparative criticism would tend rather to confusion than to clearness.

Two others, however, there are who will help materially to illustrate what has to be said about these three,—Matthew Arnold and Elizabeth Browning: the former, because he was at once among the most discriminating and the most enthusiastic of Wordsworth's disciples; the latter, for an equally obvious reason. There are no doubt three or four other names which might be entitled to equal consideration if we were about to enter on a general study of Victorian poetry; but these five suit the precise purpose I have in view, which after all is not a scientific inquiry into anything at all, but mere leisurely discussion about a group of poets who are in various ways associated in my own mind.

I may as well begin, therefore, by

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humbly acknowledging that no one need look for scientific criticism from me, because they will only find personal impressions. And that must be my excuse if the impertinent third vowel seems to crop up with undue frequency. Personal impressions have no business to be put forward with the dogmatic assertiveness of impersonal statements. Further, I had better apologise at once for any digressions I may make from the nominal subjects of the following chapters—they are merely labelled for the sake of general convenience. It was once my privilege to be a member of a society which had but one rule—‘Discussions may be held on any point, and at any distance from that point.’ And that rule will be strictly observed in these pages.

If any further justification were needed for the selection of these particular poets, a certain essay of the late Mr. Bagehot’s would supply it. Its subject is pure, ornate, and grotesque poetry, as exemplified by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and

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Browning. The essay in question is CHARAC-  
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a very interesting one—Mr. Bagehot's criticisms were always interesting, and delightfully shrewd. Still, it now and then befell that he was seized by the demon of paradox, and took it into his head to defend a thesis just for the fun of the thing by means of the most unexpected illustrations ; which occasionally had a misleading effect. Here, the main point of his paper lay in a classification of poetry as pure : poetry, that is, of which the subject is such that it can be simply treated, and so treated most effectively , ornate : such that extraneous ornamentation is required to render it pleasing ; and grotesque : such that the abnormal nature of the subject makes abnormal treatment necessary.

But there is an *obiter dictum* in the course of the essay which suggests inquiry. Mr. Bagehot observes that the people who have produced most of the literature worth having—the people whom we have to thank for the best

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books—were not the people who thought much of books. If that means only that something besides books is needed, it is true enough. A recluse can hardly be a dramatist ; you cannot understand or depict character unless you mix freely with living human beings ; and no one can write much about nature without being a good deal in the open air. Living work does not smell of musty folios. But most great writers have been great, not to say voracious, readers, and the evidence thereof is patent in their works. The impress of much reading is on the work of four at any rate of these five. Robert Browning's erudition is palpable, and to many persons is a positive stumbling-block, because he would take for granted that his readers were erudite likewise. According to Mr. Churton Collins, the Laureate had read and assimilated nearly everything that does not fall under Elia's category of books that are not books—and a good deal of that into the bargain. Mrs. Browning could

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never have struck out those epigrammatic descriptions of poets ancient and modern, without having a deeper sympathy with them than could be attained by a merely superficial acquaintance. As for Matthew Arnold, he absorbed literature as necessarily as did Milton or Ben Jonson. He read so much that the critic dominated the poet, and he suppressed 'Empedocles upon Etna' because he had evolved a theory of poetry which seemed to him to exclude that work from claiming the title. Wordsworth, indeed, conveys no impression of erudition; but no member of the 'Lake School' could have been otherwise than literary, for the society of Coleridge was in itself equivalent to the possession of an extensive library in which the books were not kept on the shelves.

But this is not the main point of Mr. Bagehot's essay, which is the comparison of three distinct poetic methods as exemplified by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; more particularly

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in connection with the then recently published volumes containing respectively 'Enoch Arden' and 'Caliban upon Setebos.' Now, if Mr. Bagehot had confined his attention to illustrating his theories of art by those particular poems, there would have been nothing to complain of. The theories are very good theories, and the poems illustrate them admirably. But he chose to take these poems as generally typical of the work of their authors, and to draw in consequence general conclusions about them of a most misleading character; more particularly misleading about Browning, because, whereas at that time most people read Tennyson for themselves, very few read Browning; and practically people were put off reading him, and seeing for themselves that Mr. Bagehot's remarks, as a *general* criticism, were very unfair. For the demon of paradox got hold of the writer, and in discussing 'Dramatis Personæ' he blandly ignored 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' and 'Abt Vogler'—not to men-

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tion 'A Death in the Desert'—because CHARAC-  
'Caliban upon Setebos' happened to TERISTICS  
fit into his thesis, and the others didn't.  
And the result is the odd conclusion  
that Browning's masterpiece is—the  
'Pied Piper.'

The truth is you can generally patch a label on to any one with a little artifice. If you take out of Wordsworth 'She was a phantom of delight,' or 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways,' you can see easily enough that 'pure' art chooses a subject of such inherent beauty that the very simplest expression is sure to be the best. But turn to Enoch Arden on his island :

'The mountain wooded to the peak, the lawns,  
And winding glades high up like ways to Heaven,  
The slender coco's drooping crown of plumes,  
The lightning flash of insect and of bird,  
The lustre of the long convolvulus  
That coiled around the stately stems, and ran  
Ev'n to the limit of the land, the glows  
And glories of the broad belt of the world,  
*All these he saw.*'

No doubt he did, but you may be tolerably sure that he didn't think about

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TERISTICS** them. Speaking from the point of view of Enoch, they are redundant. Ornate art is art which dwells on redundant gorgeous accessories, because its actual subject is insufficient.

Next if you bring on for comparison,

'Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos,  
Thinketh he dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon,'

you can get a tolerably vivid conception of the incongruous deliberately chosen as a subject; whereof the result must be Grotesque treatment. But what becomes of your classification if you bring on 'Crossing the Bar,' 'Evelyn Hope,' 'Peter Bell,' as your specimens? It is quite true that Browning is one of the very few people who could venture on the Grotesque without becoming foolish; that Tennyson's mastery of the Ornate enables him to render an inadequate subject interesting; that Wordsworth's finer poetry is all in the Pure form, because when his subject is inadequate to the pure form, his verse ceases to be poetry altogether. But

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then Browning's poetry in the main, and Tennyson's in great part, are dramatic ; and unless Mr. Bagehot's terms are to be given a very extended—and diluted—significance, it seems to me that a vast amount of dramatic work does not properly fall under any of his categories, which apply only to descriptive or narrative poems.

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Perhaps we shall get at a more fruitful method of contrast in this way. The prevailing characteristic of Wordsworth, which he shares with Matthew Arnold, is a lofty serenity. That of Robert Browning is intense energy ; that of his wife intense sensibility (not using the term in its cant sense). These are moral characteristics. But what impresses one most in Tennyson is Harmony, which is only in part moral. Wordsworth at his dullest, Arnold at his coldest, retain their serenity ; at his queerest, Browning is overflowing with vitality : at his weakest, Tennyson is harmonious. I do not refer only to the musical sound of Tennyson's verse ; I

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mean rather an intellectual quality of which that is the expression ; a singularly fine sense of proportion, of the harmonious combination of ideas as well as sounds.

These characteristics run through the whole of their work, though of course they are not mutually exclusive, so that we have from Wordsworth :

'Milton ! thou shouldst be living at this hour :  
England hath need of thee—she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters ; altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men.  
Oh, raise us up, return to us again,  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.'

Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart ;  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free.  
So didst thou travel on life's common way  
In cheerful godliness ; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.'

From Tennyson's 'Ulysses' :

'Old age hath yet his honour and his toil ;  
Death closes all ; but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.'

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From Browning's 'Abt Vogler':

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'Therefore, to whom turn I, but to Thee, the ineffable Name?

Builder and Maker Thou of houses not made with hands;

What, have fear of change from Thee, who art ever the same?

Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?

There shall never be one lost good; what was shall live as before;

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound:

What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;

On the earth, the broken arcs; in the Heaven, a perfect round.'

There is serenity, harmony, vigour, in each of these; but in each the poet's own generally characteristic quality on the whole prevails.

In each the predominance of his special characteristic has its distinct and emphatic effect on the form which is congenial. Wordsworth and Arnold are rarely successful except in metres which naturally lend themselves to a stately movement. Whenever the latter tries

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TERISTICS** a variation, even though a fine result may be obtained, it strikes one as an experimental, not a natural, mode of expression :

'Yes, we arraign her ! but she,  
The weary Titan, with deaf  
Ears, and labour-dimm'd eyes,  
Regarding neither to right  
Nor left, goes passively by,  
Staggering on to her goal.'

One wants him to go back to 'Thyrsis.' But in Tennyson, with the infinite variety of his moods, harmony always conquers, and the form is always the perfect expression of the particular mood. Only you sometimes feel a lurking suspicion that the mood was modified to fit the expression, instead of the expression to fit the mood. But with the Brownings, both of them, the intense feeling demands prompt expression, and if the spontaneous form of it happens to be harsh or jingly, harsh and jingly it must remain. The vital force is there ; it won't stand checking. So the form adopted is the one that came handy, and

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very curious it is now and then in consequence. And you get 'Caliban upon Setebos' cheek by jowl with 'Abt Vogler' and 'a Toccata'; and the jingle of 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' beside the Portuguese Sonnets. I will brave the inevitable indignation of some critics by affirming that in this matter Mrs. Browning is more deserving of reproach than her husband; because she gave way to jingle when her subject demanded dignity; whereas he is rarely really jagged, unless when in the satirical vein, save now and then when he breaks into phrases which are too forcible to be graceful. It is true that she never does quite so much violence to one's sense of metrical harmony as he does—say in 'Pacchiarotto'; but then there is generally a direct purpose to be served by his roughnesses, while with her the versification frequently spoils the desired effect.

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Wordsworth and Arnold are in the main reflective; Browning and his wife in the main dramatic or emotional; so

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that in general they cannot be brought into direct comparison. The range of Tennyson's method is more versatile, so that his work may constantly be compared with that of some one of the others. But if you compare with Wordsworth the pieces which can reasonably be brought into comparison with him, Tennyson never quite reaches the same heights of serene contemplation. He has a sweetness and a tenderness in 'In Memoriam' which you can hardly match from the elder poet; but the 'Ode to Duty' is a step higher on the ladder than he has attained to. On the other hand, when you compare his dramatic conceptions with Browning's, the latter never gives you such tender, graceful figures as Elaine or Enid; but the Laureate never gives you anything approaching the concentrated intensity of, let us say, the speaker in 'A Forgiveness,' not to mention the gallery of portraits in 'The Ring and the Book.' The Laureate's lovers are very vehement, very much carried away, and they talk

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about it all very beautifully too ; but then—they *would rather* talk about it. Browning's lovers only talk about it because the speech is dragged out of them. Relief may follow, but the utterance is agony. It suggests Lancelot bidding Lavaine to wrench the spear-head out of his wound ; every word they utter has its pang. With Tennyson's, every word they utter brings immediate relief, is balm applied to the wound. Now, that means that the emotions and passions of the Laureate's characters are more superficial ; as indeed are those of the majority of mankind. Perhaps that is why the very superficial young gentleman in 'Locksley Hall,' who wore his heart so very much on his sleeve, and found it such a comfort to explain that it really was his heart that he wore there, is so very popular. Excitement inspires sympathy so much more readily than the kind of feeling which so tugs at your heart-strings, that it takes you all your time to keep it from snapping

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them. When you are wrestling for life, you can't shout about it. You want all your breath for the struggle. But it doesn't move the spectators so much.

Now, I am not instituting a comparison in the sense that I am trying to decide which great man is half an inch taller than the other. That kind of sweeping comparison is pretty sure to be misleading. You cannot rationally compare matters which have no common criterion. After you have admitted—or denied—that the art of the painter appeals to a wider public than that of the musician, you cannot make any further comparison, unless by purely empirical methods, of the artistic uses of painting and music. No more can you compare the merits of 'The Excursion,' 'In Memoriam,' and 'The Ring and the Book.' Their methods are different and their ends are different. You may say that the purpose fulfilled by one poem is more important than the purpose fulfilled by the others ; you may discover specific points of compari-

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son ; you may be entirely aware that CHARAC-  
TERISTICS you personally have benefited much more by the one than by the others ; but a general comparison is not much more profitable or rational than would be one between a sonata of Beethoven and a statue of Michael Angelo. So all I mean here is, that while in the particular quality which we are entitled to claim of all poets, harmonious utterance, Tennyson at all times attains to a level of excellence of which Wordsworth and Browning both frequently fall short, in those particular regions of artistic effort where a part of his work comes into direct comparison with the work of either of the other poets, each in his own field has excelled him. There are other regions which, so far as they are concerned, he has to himself.

But even when no general comparisons are possible, there is generally a certain amount of overlapping ; you can usually find a certain number of individual poems by one man which you can compare with individual poems by

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another. Mrs. Browning and Wordsworth, as a rule, are much too far apart ; Coleridge is the one member of the early constellation with whom the poetess has a sort of kinship ; but you can here and there find special characteristics very well illustrated by looking at a poem from each together. Take two pictures of maidenhood, for instance : from Wordsworth, the well-known lines beginning :

‘Three years she grew in sun and shower :  
Then Nature said, “A lovelier flower  
On earth was never sown :  
This child I to myself will take ;  
She shall be mine, and I will make  
A Lady of my own.”’

Set beside these ‘My Kate’ :

‘She was not as pretty as women I know,  
And yet all your best made of sunshine and snow  
Drop to shade, melt to nought in the untrodden ways,  
While she’s still remembered on warm and cold days—  
My Kate.

‘I doubt if she said to you much that could act  
As a thought or suggestion ; she did not attract  
In the sense of the brilliant or wise ; I infer  
’Twas her thinking of others made you think of her—  
My Kate.

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'My dear one ! when thou wast alive with the rest,  
I held thee the sweetest and loved thee the best :  
And now thou art dead, shall I not take thy part  
As thy smiles used to do for thyself, my sweet Heart—  
My Kate ?'

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Well, there Wordsworth got an adequate subject, and the result is that his treatment is perfect. You have a consummate piece of finished, artistic workmanship. Mrs. Browning's conception is not less beautiful ; some people would find the portrait they carry away from her poem in their minds a more delightful one to dwell on than the other. But it is not a finished piece of artistic workmanship at all ; it jingles. Yet it is the real thing for all that. Now, if Wordsworth fails in form, you may be pretty sure that it is *not* the real thing : that his matter is inadequate. Mrs. Browning is pretty sure to fail in form, whether her matter is adequate or not.

If Mrs. Browning and Wordsworth are far apart, the gulf between her and Matthew Arnold is even wider ; one

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could hardly name two poets who appeal to such distinct classes of readers. No doubt they are both exceedingly 'literary' in the sense that each had absorbed a vast amount of literature which has left very evident marks on their work. But there resemblance ceases. For the absorption was in the one an intellectual process, in the other mainly emotional; and so it was with them in most other respects. Nearly always the woman's emotions dominated her intellect, the man's intellect dominated his emotions; with the result that Matthew Arnold most of all appeals to the academic, the critical mind, which rejoices in some classically turned phrase, takes pleasure in polished and scholarly form, and finds delight in what is dignified, orderly, controlled. Such persons distrust impulses; here is a poet who is never carried away by impulse. Without impulses, of course, he never could have been a poet at all, but they are held carefully in check. But the aca-

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demic order of mind is precisely that which is irritated by the untrimmed luxuriance of Mrs. Browning, with its disturbing effect upon orderly ideas.

For the poetess is emphatically impulsive; as she is moved, so she speaks. One observes that her favourite among the Greeks is 'Euripides the human, with his droppings of warm tears,' the least classical or 'pure,' as Mr. Bagehot would have it, of the Athenian dramatists. Even when Matthew Arnold adopts the dramatic form, his passion is of the statuesque, stately order. Whereas, even when her theme is most dignified, Mrs. Browning is apt to be, not turbid or turgid, but gusty.

Now, it follows from this fact that sustained harmonies are not to be expected from the poetess. But she does now and then give bits of melody, and melody is very rare in Wordsworth, Arnold, or Robert Browning. The distinction is an exceedingly difficult one to put into words; I doubt if it will make my meaning much clearer to sub-

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'Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan,  
Piercing sweet by the river !  
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan !  
The sun on the hill forgot to die,  
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly  
Came back to dream on the river.'

There is a music in that which thrills one ; but it is altogether different from the music of 'Thyrsis,' or Wordsworth's sonnet to Milton, or the invocation, 'O lyric love, half-angel and half-bird.' Perhaps if we note that the corruption of one style turns to jingle, and the corruption of the other to prose, we shall feel where the distinction comes in.

I have already remarked that Tennyson's most striking characteristic is harmony ; but when that is applied specifically to the *sound* of his verse, it must be modified by the addition of 'melody.' There is a peculiar quality about Tennysonian verse ; it is not melodious merely —the music is deeper than mere melody —but even his blank verse is melodious.

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insomuch, that we have actual songs in CHARAC-  
blank verse (and melody is the soul of TERISTICS  
song), such as 'Tears, idle tears.' It  
is not, therefore, surprising to find that  
Tennyson has produced many songs  
among his poems, while the others have  
produced many poems, but hardly a  
song. In dramatic range and force he  
has been surpassed by Browning, in  
moral elevation by Wordsworth ; but  
as a maker of songs he stands, in our  
days at least, alone

## II

### TENNYSON IN PARTICULAR



T would hardly be possible to name two poets of equal calibre, and so nearly contemporaneous, who afford such an effective critical contrast as the Laureate and Robert Browning, unless indeed Wordsworth and Shelley, and they differ in quite another fashion. For whereas the two latter start from views of the universe and its Creator, which, superficially at least, are directly opposed, these two poets are fundamentally at one. Mainly it is in their artistic methods, their attitude towards certain secondary questions, and generally the

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*treatment of the problems that present themselves, that they are contrasted ; and the result, or one result, of this contrast is that as there is a Dickens camp and a Thackeray camp, so there is now —since Browning has really made his way to a certain popularity—a Tennyson camp and a Browning camp ; and the votaries of either poet think it needful to belittle the other in order the more to magnify their own favourite , and commonly give way to the inclination to turn the very faults of their bard into merits, by way of proving that the merits of the other are very little better than faults* Surely there is a Round Table of the Immortals, where Shakespeare is indeed the king approved by acclamation, but the rest may sit without jars and disputes as to the order of precedence. Seeing that constitutions vary, we must all have our favourites , but to justify ourselves we need not deny our neighbours the like privilege.

The representatives of the newest school sometimes shock their elders

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

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TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

by the criticisms they launch at the Laureate. Colonel Newcome, in his day, felt very much disturbed at hearing the young men say that Byron was no poet, and Tennyson was going to rank far above him. The whirligig of time is bringing its revenges ; but it isn't going to stop whirling with our generation. But perhaps some of the elders would be more inclined to recognise that these things are not due to mere *fin de siècle* viciousness if they remembered that there was a time when they were themselves looked at askance by their own seniors for their revolutionary principles. So it has been, so it is now, and so it will be for ever till Utopia is finally established. Every generation thinks that the one which preceded moved too slow, and the one coming after it is moving too fast. So I would suggest that Tennyson is not the less great because he was in sympathy with a time that is past ; nor the greater because he is in some respects out of sympathy with the times to-day ; ■

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other words, I have to call attention to certain weaknesses which we are frequently bidden to admire, and certain merits which we are called upon to contemn.

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

Perhaps the two 'Locksley Hall' poems present as good an example as we can find of the wrong bases for admiring the Laureate. I suppose that there is no single poem in which his marvellous command of the resources of his metre, his almost magical capacity for coining a perfect phrase, show themselves so prodigally as in 'Locksley Hall.'

'Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I  
went to rest,  
Did I look on great Orion sloping slowly to the west.  
Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising through the  
mellow shade,  
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver  
braid.

Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in  
his glowing hands;  
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden  
sands.

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- TENNYSON   Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the  
IN PAR-      chords with might ;  
TICULAR   Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, passed in  
                music out of sight.'

For sheer splendour of diction and glory of sound I do not know many lines comparable to these. So again,

' In the dead unhappy night, and when the rain is on  
the roof,

conveys the desired sense of unutterable dreariness and desolation so completely, that I feel almost guilty of a ~~bull~~ in employing the word unutterable. In short, so far as concerns metrical technique and mastery of language, the poem is one which Tennyson has never surpassed. But when we turn to the *thought*—the general purport of the poem—it is astonishing to find how many people will rate you as a philistine, a worldling, and generally no better than you should be, if you venture to hint that the speaker is a decidedly egotistical and conceited youth with a capacity for rant, and a miscellaneous enthusiasm for ideals.

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which is strong in proportion to their vagueness; whose sufferings are chiefly due, not to the intensity of his devotion to the shallow-hearted damsel, but to his annoyance at her not having thought him quite such a hero as he expected.

But this was a poem of the writer's youth ; it is full of the spirit of youth, of vehement if somewhat superficial emotion ; its ideals, like those of youth generally, are vague but gorgeous ; and probably it appeals almost as strongly to the young people of to-day as to the young people of half a century back. It is different with the poem of sixty years later. This is an expression chiefly of disillusionment ; and in direct proportion to the joyousness of the vague youthful dreams is the dreariness of the disgust of old age ; while the speaker remains in his later years just as egotistical, just as incapable of appreciating a different point of view, just as partial and one-sided in his judgments, as in the early days : and

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

TENNYSON just as cock-sure. Dramatically, the new 'Locksley Hall' is the true and necessary epilogue to the first poem, the hero of which would inevitably come to look upon life in the fashion of the speaker of sixty years later ; but the one view will serve no better than the other as a guide in human affairs. Dramatically, the two poems are as consistent as possible ; as admirable in their way as the 'Northern Farmer,' or Browning's 'Bishop Blougram.' Nor need we, in the face of another poem so recent as the 'Ancient Sage,' feel called upon to regard this elderly pessimist as being merely the poet's mouthpiece, instead of a dramatic study. But we protest against having the second poem held up to us as the ripe wisdom of a matured mind which had laid to heart the words of Rabbi Ben Ezra—

‘Young, all lay in dispute. I shall know,  
being old.’

So with some others of the Laureate’s

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later poems, which are more or less attacks upon modern doctrines, but are essentially not adapted as medicine for people who have been bitten by the said doctrines. For this reason: the things said may be all very true; the errors attacked may be very pernicious; but if you wish to convert any one from the error of his ways, you must begin by getting at his point of view: it is worse than waste of breath to start by telling him that he thinks what he doesn't think, wants what he doesn't want, is satisfied with what doesn't satisfy him; and then to call him names. You must recognise the good in him and let him see that you do so, before you can persuade him to treat you in like manner—for if you follow the other plan, he will straightway decline to listen to you, and adopt your own method in attacking you back. Hence, if these poems are taken as sermons or treatises, they must be condemned as more likely to injure than to aid the cause which they support:

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

TENNYSON whereas if they are duly recognised as  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR dramatic utterances their merit is at once apparent.

But if there is at times to some of us a temptation to praise the poet on the wrong ground, there is no less temptation from another point of view to make light of him on the wrong ground. One finds the very perfection of his workmanship turned against him. The thing is so consummately done that one can hardly believe in the power it implies. Let us recall a certain Roundabout Paper of Thackeray's — 'Notes of a Week's Holiday.' The critic stands before a picture by Rubens, and discourses : 'Now you know the trick, don't you see how easy it is? . . . Now you know the trick, suppose you take a canvas and see whether *you* can do it?' There's the rub. There are dozens of little people who have learnt the trick to the extent that you can see well enough it is Tennyson they are imitating ; but *they can't do it*. I have quoted already from one of his early

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

poems — here is a verse from one of Tennyson  
the latest :

IN PAR-  
TICULAR

'To sleep ! to sleep ! the long bright day is done,  
And darkness rises from the fallen sun.  
To sleep ! To sleep !'

A simple trick—nothing out of the way about it, is there ? But match it outside of Tennyson if you can.

But if such lines as these stood by themselves ; if it were only here and there that they could be found ; one might view them as happy accidents. The thing is that they are everywhere. You could match them out of half the stanzas in 'In Memoriam' ; you could match them by writing down his lyrics miscellaneous as they happened to come into your head. There is no English poet, unless it be Milton or Spenser, who displays so consistent, so unvarying a control of his verse as the Laureate ; and neither of them approaches him in the astonishing variety of the forms of versification he employs. The worst that can be said is that such excellence is like his own Maud's features,

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

TENNYSON ' faultily faultless ' ; such perfection is a little monotonous. There are a good many people who prefer Lancelot to Arthur.

Herein is one of the most marked contrasts between Tennyson and Browning ; for the latter abounds in those brusque, unpolished methods of speech which are never to be found in the former's work. On the other hand, exquisite as is the Laureate's phraseology, he never produces the same sense of tremendous vigour. There is in him something of over-refinement, over-delicacy ; and it seems that this is due to a difference in their attitude. Browning is before all things a fighter

' I was ever a fighter—so, one fight more ',  
but Tennyson is far more of the dreamer.  
If Browning pauses, it is in the spirit of  
Rabbi Ben Ezra :

' Ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new ';

whereas Tennyson pauses to contemplate the past for its own sake.

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

Hence it is that Tennyson is supreme **TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR** in a field of emotion which Browning has left untouched ; the field of retrospection. It is natural and right that in this he should appeal to the young less, and to those who are growing old more, than does his great compeer. Young men and maidens with their lives before them—what have they to do with lamenting for ‘the tender grace of a day that is dead’? They have got to make a new day with a grace of its own. The battle of life is before them ; ‘soldiers all, to forward face.’ But for those who have already borne the brunt it is different. They, who have seen the loved friends of their youth pass before them to the undiscovered country ; to whom the sweet companionship of early years has become a memory, a dream full of the sorrow that yet is touched by the dawning light of the joy which cometh in the morning — these can turn legitimately to ‘In Memoriam’ and to lyric after lyric, to find the noblest expression

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

TENNYSON of those feelings which in the young  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR ought never to be more than a passing mood, but from their own minds can seldom be altogether absent.

Yet to souls struggling under the burden of some overwhelming sorrow—sorrow under which the heroic attitude of a Rabbi Ben Ezra seems for a time to be little better than a mockery—‘In Memoriam’ must always appeal intensely by its very tenderness ; it is the balm they need before they are fit for the stimulant that adds a sting of its own.

I have implied that these poems of retrospection are not wholly suited for youthful minds to dwell on. It is good, no doubt, to turn to them at times ; but though at times their attraction cannot but be felt intensely, it is nevertheless to-day probably comparatively slight for the young people. The more vigorous minds are too much occupied with looking forward ; the more dreamy have a tendency to prefer what is more introspective and often more morbid. The characteristic note of ‘In Memoriam’—

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

the lofty fortitude, the profound, if not very enthusiastic, faith which tinges its melancholy and gives the poem an even higher rank than would be secured to it by its consummate melodies and the depth of the feelings it so exquisitely expresses—is just what makes it unsatisfactory to latter-day pessimism. There is a kind of determined despair, a thirsting after the luxury of woe, evident in the writings of some minor authors of the day, which, while Tennyson is wholly free from it, is in favour with a certain cultivated and rather imaginative order of mind most commonly found in highly self-conscious young people. For them Tennyson is not a sufficiently vigorous antidote, while he fails to satisfy their craving for melancholy. Hence it is that the whole class of his poems of which ‘In Memoriam’ is the chief to a great extent fail in winning the critical approval of the younger generation. They are neither an inspiration to action, nor an expression of ‘the dismsals.’

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

TENNYSON IN PARTICULAR As Tennyson reigns supreme in the field of these emotions which are not indeed the most intense, but are among the most universal and most deeply rooted of our nature, he is also unsurpassed as a writer of what we generally understand by Idylls, those lighter flights of fancy which deal rather with tender sentiments than with strong passions ; where a pervading playfulness keeps at bay any sustained seriousness or approach to tragic feeling : whereof perhaps the perfect type is Shakspeare's 'As You Like It.' The most elaborate example in Tennyson is his 'Princess' ; of the Idylls of the King, 'Gareth and Lynette' belongs to the same category, and perhaps 'Geraint and Enid,' but no other. The names of 'The Brook' and the 'Gardener's Daughter' will suffice to show the precise class of work to which I am referring ; poems in which the larger problem, the eternal mysteries of Life and Death, Suffering and Triumph, have no place ; in which we are fain to forget the cares of this world

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

and the deceitfulness of riches, in the TENNYSON  
scent of the wild-flowers and the song  
of the throstle, the chatter of the brook  
and the flicker of woodland sunlight.  
They call for no intellectual effort ;  
they do not send the blood leaping  
through your veins—though the poet  
can do that now and then when he has  
a mind to—but they are full of a de-  
lightful restfulness and a delicate har-  
mony which are wonderfully soothing,  
and render them the choicest company in  
hours of weariness, or of rebellion against  
the spirit of perpetual introspection.

It is a common complaint to-day  
that the songs which we hear in draw-  
ing-rooms are the most unmitigated  
trash possible. This is so undeniable  
that one would scarcely have imagined  
that, for sixty years, Tennyson has been  
writing songs which south of the Tweed  
have hardly been matched since ‘the  
spacious days of great Elizabeth’; when  
the gift of song was so common that  
— witness Mr. Bullen’s collections —  
half a hundred anonymous authors

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**TENNYSON IN PARTICULAR** produced lyrics of which Shakspeare would have been proud. Is it the composers that are at fault, or is there some technical flaw in the Laureate's work that makes his songs difficult to sing? For he has produced any number of songs which, judged by a purely literary standard, are as near perfection as may be; which you can hardly read without finding that they are setting themselves to music in your head. One need not go back for examples to 'Break, break, break,' or the lyrics in the 'Princess.' 'To sleep' has been quoted already; 'Romney's Remorse' is in the '89 volume:

I have heard people jeer at 'The Throstle,' but it appears that folks who do so may be confidently expected not to know the difference between a thrush's note and a skylark's. It has the very warble of the bird in its

'Here again, here, here, here, happy year.'

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

In each of these three fields, then—TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR the Elegy, the Idyll, the Song—Tennyson has done work which would place him among the great masters of his craft. Gray is commonly reckoned among our leading poets, mainly on the strength of a single achievement in one only of these fields. It has been said that the 'Elegy' is a greater poem than 'In Memoriam,' inasmuch as it appeals to simpler and more universal emotions. It would seem reasonable to reply that, by parity of reasoning, 'Break, break, break'—or 'Crossing the Bar'—is a greater poem than Gray's 'Elegy,' and 'Hush-a-bye Baby' greater than any of them.

If the end of poetry were merely enjoyment, the exercise of pleasurable emotions in the sense commonly understood by the phrase, there would be little more to say. But we do want something more from our great men: most of us are hardly inclined to admit that any one is entitled to a place at the Round Table of the Immortals

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

TENNYSON unless he can do more than please us :  
IN PARTICULAR unless he can in some sort inspire us, vivify our ideals, ennable our aspirations : unless the Maker has in him something also of the Seer. Now, judgment cannot be passed by one generation for the generations still to come. The teacher who does not give just what present conditions have made his hearers ready to accept, is apt to meet with hard criticism. The charm of his verse, the clearness of his language, the flow of his narrative insure a certain popularity for Tennyson ; they secure for him an audience who find Browning insuperable, Matthew Arnold unsympathetic, Wordsworth dreary. But along with the superficial affectation of moral limpness which is supposed to be prevalent just now, there is a very real, if sometimes misdirected, energy, both moral and intellectual : even more marked, perhaps, among girls than among their brothers. The tendency among the cleverer and more vigorous spirits seems to be to deprecate Tenny-

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

son on the ground that they find his TENNYSON IN PARTICULAR ideals inefficient ; and for these ideals we must turn to the 'Idylls of the King.'

Now, one reason for this feeling becomes apparent at the outset. The whole atmosphere of the Idylls is unreal to an age which is very much in touch with hard facts. The Arthurian age never existed ; the knights of the Round Table are somewhat wanting in everyday humanity : they are dream figures, or persons in an allegory. It is not that the story is placed in the past—Chaucer's knight and squire and parson, and the rest of his pilgrims, have nothing of this character—but that it is placed in a *mythical* past. It is the machinery of the Idylls which, like that of Spenser, prevents a certain order of mind from appreciating them. You require either more imagination, or too little of that quality. We may appreciate the beauty of the lines, but we fail to find ourselves in sympathy with the characters ; unless it be Guinevere, who almost

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

TENNYSON alone is *greatly* human in her passion,  
IN PARTICULAR her sin and her repentance. They are too  
much of abstractions, and hence much  
of their beauty is apt to be lost upon  
us. It is a matter on which no one  
can speak with certainty; we can only  
give personal impressions for what they  
are worth—but is not this effect to  
some extent the consequence of merely  
passing conditions?

Perhaps the most remarkable criticism  
that has been passed upon King Arthur  
is that he is a Bourgeois ideal. It would  
be less surprising almost to have him  
described as Democratic. If courtesy  
and kindness, self-control and self-  
sacrifice, purity and justice, make up  
the Bourgeois ideal, then Arthur is  
Bourgeois; and to be so described  
would be a remarkably high compli-  
ment. That there is a coldness about  
him, some lack of sympathy, some in-  
capacity for understanding the force  
of passion, is undeniable; some con-  
sciousness that he is called to his  
work not by his brotherhood, but by

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

his superiority. Yet hear the oath of TENNYSON  
his knights :

IN PAR-  
TICULAR

'I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the king as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as their king,  
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her.'

The 'bourgeois' ideal appears to involve, primarily, self-devotion in aiding the weak against oppression, and loyalty to the king ; who was none the worse under the circumstances for not being a paid elective committee with a caucus.

'For indeed I know  
Of no more subtle master under heaven  
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,  
Not only to keep down the base in man,  
But teach high thought, and amiable words,  
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,  
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.'

A man might do worse than take those lines as a motto. If he lives up to them, he will leave a fair record.

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR And the maiden who wants to inspire such a passion would need to have a tolerably high ideal too.

The spirit of these lines runs through and through the Idylls. The ideal is not thoroughly satisfying, because one feels that it starts too much from the point of view of 'noblesse oblige,' and has too little personal sympathy in it ; we are conscious of an inclination to regard our neighbours rather as items than as people with temptations due to circumstances which we don't understand, and trials which we have never experienced. It does not indeed follow that, because the ideal is not altogether sympathetic, it is not one which we require especially to bear in mind. We are restless, impatient, eager for a goal ; while our ideas of the goal, and the way to it, are vague. Patience, self-restraint, subordination, are virtues which can easily be preached until to our indignant eyes they assume the aspect of pusillanimity and slavish conventionality. But they are virtues all the same. Unduly ex-

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

aggerated or pressed upon us as if they were the highest qualities of our nature, TENNYSON  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR they are the enemies of progress ; but without them, progress degenerates into chaos. It is possible to lay too much stress on mere graces of demeanour, the 'amiable words and courtliness,' which are always liable to a suspicion of being worn as a mask : but to-day we are more apt to underrate than to over-value them.

The Tennysonian ideal is incomplete, as belonging to a different set of social conditions ; incomplete for men and women alike, because the same conditions which affect the masculine ideal affect the feminine ideal likewise. But the position of women as giving men their inspiration abides, however much

'The old order changeth, yielding place to new.'

And men and women alike may well adopt the Law of the Round Table, though their point of view in doing so may not be the same as that of Arthur and his knights and maidens.

### III

## BROWNING IN PARTICULAR



HERE is no poet who inspires amongst those who have become fairly intimate with him a keener, not to say a more intolerant, enthusiasm than Robert Browning. His teaching becomes an essential part of their intellectual and spiritual being, an ever-present influence in their daily lives. But it is rather to those who have not yet found their way to him that I seek to appeal, and possibly to render some assistance.

Let me then endeavour to guard against certain possible misunderstand-

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

ings. In the first place, what was said BROWNING  
about Tennyson a few pages back IN PAR-  
TICULAR applies with no less force to Browning :  
to pass judgment on one who has so  
lately gone from among us, one whose  
work, even when written fifty years  
back, belongs in effect to our own gene-  
ration, is practically impossible. We  
know what the poet is to *us*; we cannot  
tell what he will be to the generation  
that will be growing up fifty years  
hence. Each generation has its own  
problems, its own set of newly ascer-  
tained facts, which have to be brought  
into line with the old eternal truths,  
while they seem at the first to cut at  
the very root of those old truths. And  
so it is that the solutions which satisfied  
our grandfathers seem to us no solu-  
tions at all. And it always seems as  
if the old problems had been of no  
account, and the new one, for the time,  
is so vital; so that the man who answers  
*our* questionings seems to us an oracle  
for all time. And the worst of it is  
that the problems of the generation just

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING before our own generally seem to be  
IN PAR-TICULAR the most trivial of all, for the very simple reason that the solutions which have been arrived at through much travail and conflict of soul have just had time to become commonplace and hackneyed. We cannot, then, 'place' one to whom we owe so much. The critic's part is to point out where there is treasure beyond price to be found ; it is not his office to draw up a class-list of the immortals.

In the second place, if I have found it necessary to emphasise some of the defects in Browning's work, I trust that the most enthusiastic and the least discriminating of his admirers—they are not to be identified—will not feel hurt. But indiscriminate praise is not the method by which those persons will most readily be induced to study Browning who will get most benefit out of him. Human nature is contrary, and if you urge a man promiscuously to read Browning, he will inevitably begin upon 'Sordello,' and equally in-

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

evitably he will refuse to try any more. BROWNING  
IN PAR-TICULAR  
Now, you might as well endeavour to study geometry by starting on the second book of Euclid as to study Browning by starting on 'Sordello.' An enthusiast recently declared that our poet was faultless 'but for a certain hardness in his blank verse.' Well, to put it mildly, that is exaggerated praise for the discoverer of the truly remarkable rhymes to (let us say) 'Manchester' and 'Witenagemot.'

Thirdly, I am not to be understood as in any way impugning the truth or validity of theological doctrines or arguments to be found in Browning, when I say that a good many critics show a general tendency to exaggerate their importance as Browning's 'message.' No doubt the author of 'Easter-Day' awakens our tendencies to speculation in the realms of theology, logic, and metaphysics ; but to dwell on his treatment of problems of that class, to the exclusion of what is poetically speaking more important, is precisely the critical blunder which has

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING done most to produce a misleading idea  
IN PARTICULAR of what he has done and can do for us.  
A scientific discussion either in rhyme or blank verse may be interesting, but it is rarely convincing. It is the function of the poet to appeal through the emotions, the logician's appeal is purely intellectual; and the logician is apt to break the poetical spell, as the poet is apt to introduce a disturbance in the logician's syllogism.

It will be found to be something very like a universal rule that the people who deprecate Browning are those who have not been at the trouble to read him. The phrase is used advisedly, for, to begin with, you must be at some trouble to read him. Here are no commonplace thoughts such as we all think every day, decked out in graceful language. The demon of the circulating library is not incited to scribble 'How true!' about the margin of 'The Ring and the Book.' Here is none of the tawdry pessimism which captivates the too numerous unfortunates who mistake

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

dyspepsia for '*Weltschmerz*.' Again, BROWNING  
there is hardly a story, a ballad, or a  
song to be found among all the volumes.  
IN PAR-TICULAR  
In short, Browning did little work in  
those fields of poetry where it is *easiest*  
to read. Chiefly he is concerned with  
states of feeling which are both very  
intense and highly complex; out of the  
ken of those who never feel very deeply  
and are rarely actuated by complex  
motives, and requiring considerable emo-  
tional and intellectual effort to be appre-  
ciated even by the others.

To the natural difficulty presented by  
his favourite subjects is added, for the  
ordinary reader, the obstacle of certain  
idiosyncrasies of form, mannerisms, and  
eccentricities, which will probably be  
always found irritating, and are especi-  
ally so to an age which has revelled  
in the somewhat excessive graces and  
amazing mastery of form displayed by  
the Laureate and a variety of lesser  
poets. A habit of using exceedingly  
colloquial words and phrases, and  
rhymes which are remarkable rather for

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

BROWNING <sup>IN PARTICULAR</sup> ingenuity than melody, of leaving out relatives, of compressing a sentence till at first sight the meaning seems condensed away altogether, of inserting parentheses marked only by a method of punctuation peculiar to the author, of throwing in a casual allusion to some event or place or person familiar to this exceedingly erudite writer but quite incomprehensible to the unlearned—all this must be charged to Browning, and materially increases the difficulty, and diminishes the pleasure, of reading him, to any one not thoroughly inured to his ways.

These defects, in a greater or less degree, are to be met with very nearly throughout Browning's work ; it is only here and there that a poem can be found entirely free from some touch of them. Yet, when once you come to know the bulk of the poems, these things sink into entire insignificance. They hardly affect our enjoyment ; nay, to many persons they positively enhance it. Many a truth with which we have all

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

been familiar—so familiar that we have BROWNING  
mentally shoved it into the background IN PAR-  
as not worth bearing in mind—comes  
upon us with a fresh and startling sense  
as of a new discovery, when it is pre-  
sented in an unaccustomed dress; for  
the first time it becomes real and living,  
the words in which it was presented  
become the only possible method of  
expressing it, the very faultiness of  
the form becomes a virtue. It is only  
before we are sufficiently habituated—  
only while we are still ready to be  
scared by a superficial roughness—that  
these defects are of consequence.

But a more serious matter is Browning's affection for subjects which are of little interest except to psychological anatomists. It is to this that we owe 'Fifines' and 'Inn Albums,' 'Red-Cotton Nightcap-Country' and 'Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau'; as well as other shorter productions. Writing in the character of a sort of sign-post for those who have never attempted to read Browning, or have tried and failed, I

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

BROWNING should say that the volumes I have  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR named here ought never to be attempted  
save by the enthusiast. They have an  
interest of their own ; they could never  
have been produced but by a brain  
of the most astonishing subtlety and  
power ; but just as the average raw  
youth who tries to make his fortune  
by gold-digging is apt to find that he  
has an exceedingly unpleasant time,  
and nothing to show for it at the end,  
so to ordinary mortals the process of  
delving in Browning's most abstruse  
expositions of abnormal human nature  
is productive only of bad temper and  
a general unreasoning bias against the  
poet and all his works.

It ought to be superfluous to tell beginnners to avoid those works of their author which are declared on all hands to be the least attractive, the hardest of comprehension, and the dullest which he has given to the world. We do not begin *Æschylus* with the 'Seven against Thebes' ; nor Wordsworth with the 'Excursion.' But human nature is so

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

perverse that an extraordinary number BROWNING  
of people persist in making their first IN PAR-  
attempt on 'Sordello'; and, finding that TICULAR  
ten pages of that has left them thor-  
oughly befogged, they proceed to tell  
you that people only say they like  
Browning because they like to show  
off. That is, of course, mere nonsense.  
Some of his keenest admirers, who have  
derived an infinity of courage and con-  
solation from his poems, whose sym-  
pathies have been enlarged and their  
ideals ennobled by them, who have been  
strengthened by them in heart and brain  
—are people whom their best friends  
or worst enemies would never dream of  
describing as either clever or conceited.

It is no very long time since the  
'Shilling Browning' was issued to an  
expectant public, and was received  
generally with an indignant chorus.  
No one could pretend to say that "it is  
an adequate or thoroughly satisfactory  
collection ; but though it might have  
been a great deal better—every lover  
of the poet probably feels that he or

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING she would have made something much  
IN PARTICULAR better of it—it might assuredly have been a great deal worse. Personally, it appeared to me that the most flagrantly inexcusable omissions were those of 'Saul' and 'Love among the Ruins.' For 'Saul' at least is one of the very first poems which I should put in the hands, let us say, of a girl who wanted to be introduced to Browning. But apart from this, and from the fact that 'Mr. Sludge' is utterly out of place in such a collection, the 'Shilling Browning' is the simplest introduction that can well be given. From it the student will realise that the poet is not always so very ungainly and so dreadfully hard to understand after all. Let any good reader pronounce these lines from 'Abt Vogler':

'All we have willed, or hoped, or dreamed of good  
shall exist ;  
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor  
good, nor power  
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for  
the melodist  
When Eternity affirms the conception of an hour.'

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth BROWNING  
    too hard,  
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in IN PAR-  
    the sky, TICULAR  
Are music sent up to God by the Lover and the  
    Bard ;  
Enough that he heard it once ; we shall hear it  
    by-and-by.'

Or this, from 'One Word More,' by way  
of contrast :

'But the best is when I glide from out them,  
Cross the step or two of dubious twilight,  
Come out on the other side, the novel  
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,  
Where I hush, and bless myself with silence.'

Or this, out of 'Home Thoughts from  
Abroad' :

'Oh, to be in England  
Now that April's there !  
And whoever wakes in England  
Sees some morning, unaware,  
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf, "  
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough  
In England—now !'

It is sufficient to refer to these lines,  
recalled at random, to for ever refute

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING the doctrine that if music is a necessary  
IN PARTICULAR quality in poetry, Browning is no poet.  
Others (all, if I remember rightly, in  
the selection) rise readily to the mind :  
'The Lost Leader'; 'A Toccata';  
'Summum Bonum'; 'The Last Ride';  
'Evelyn Hope.' Or again, some which  
have been, alas! omitted : 'There's a  
woman like a dew-drop'; 'Over the  
sea our galleys went'; 'Saul'; 'Love  
among the Ruins'; that grand passage  
from 'The Ring and the Book':

'O Lyric Love, half angel and half bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire.'

If we have to admit that there are too  
many harsh lines, crabbed passages, and  
surprising rhymes among the selected  
poems, as elsewhere, we can assuredly  
claim that there are also not only lines  
and stanzas, but whole poems of the  
most splendid verse.

It would, however, seem probable that  
the initial difficulty caused by defects  
of style, insignificant as we may learn  
in time to account them, must always

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

act as a check on any really widely extended popularity. This, however, can hardly be regarded as a drawback on the author's greatness. For it is not by the number, but by the moral and intellectual calibre of his readers that the influence of a great writer must be measured ; it may often be that vast numbers who have not read a line of one man's works are his unconscious disciples, while another, whose volumes are in the hands of 'every one,' shall hardly have availed to influence one solitary act in the lives of all his readers.

If we wish duly to understand Browning, it is of vital importance to keep one fact constantly in mind—that most of his poems are spoken by men and women,

'Live or dead, or fashioned to his fancy,'

and that their opinions are not necessarily the opinions of the author. He has pronounced clearly enough in 'One Word More' on this point, when he is

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING speaking avowedly for himself and no  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR one else, to his wife :

'Love, you saw me gather men and women  
Live or dead, or fashioned to my fancy :  
Enter each and all and use their service,  
Speak from every mouth,—the speech a poem.  
Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,  
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving.  
I am mine and yours—the rest be all men's,  
Karshish, Cleon, Norbert, and the Fifty ;  
Let me speak *this once in my true person.*'

It is true that Browning speaks through his characters, but the thought is modified by the point of view of the person uttering it, so that we have Evelyn Hope's lover implying a clear belief in a series of lives in a series of worlds ; and the speaker of 'Old Pictures in Florence' repudiating the same idea. So thorough is the poet's capacity for sympathising with his characters, that he has even succeeded in imparting a kind of sincerity to the sophistries of Mr. Sludge and Bishop Blougram. But we must beware always of proclaiming that Browning held this or that doctrine

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because one of his characters has given it BROWNING  
expression ; as I have known people who IN PAR-  
supposed that Bishop Blougram stands  
TICULAR  
as Browning's apologist for Christianity  
— whereas the Bishop is simply Mr.  
Worldly Wiseman compounding for the  
chance of eternal life.

The range of Browning's sympathies —his power of entering into, understanding, accounting for, the most diverse characters—has rarely, if ever, been surpassed. For a poet whose chief subject-matter was to be human nature in its more emotional and more complex phases, he was magnificently equipped. Unlike Wordsworth, he deals comparatively little with Nature apart from man. But this is due to no neglect or lack of appreciation on his part. There are descriptive passages, only too rare, which show at once the minuteness of his observation and the intensity of his enjoyment, as in the 'Englishman in Italy,' 'Home Thoughts from Abroad,' and 'By the Fireside.' On the other hand, a picture has rarely

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING been painted at once with strokes so  
**IN PAR-**  
**TICULAR** few and with such completeness of effect  
as in this, 'Meeting at Night':

'The grey sea and the long black land,  
And the yellow half-moon large and low,  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.'

A reference has already been made to the theological poems. These serve particularly well to point the distinction between teacher and poet; for it is essentially the function of the latter to appeal *through the emotions*. It follows that, whereas the teacher may resort to close reasoning and elaborate logic, the poet convinces us not so much by his irrefutable syllogisms as by the vivid expression of intense conviction. We must distinguish, therefore, between the theological and the religious; between the intellectual and the emotional treatment of the relation between God and man. Now and then, in that group of pieces which I class as theological—

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'A Death in the Desert'; 'Christmas BROWNING  
Eve'; 'Easter Day'; 'La Saisiaz'; IN PAR-  
'Cleon'; 'Karshish'; the body of  
'Ferishtah,' and some others—the *poet*  
breaks out :

'For life, with all it yields of joy, and woe,  
And hope, and fear—believe the aged friend—  
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,  
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is,  
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost  
Such prize despite the envy of the world,  
And having gained truth, keep truth ; that is all.'

But for the most part the value of them is mainly intellectual : admirable as they are, they stand on a lower poetical plane than the rest. We turn from them to 'Saul' to find the true basis of the faith that is in us—the intense conviction of the Creator's transcendent love ; an inspiration, an intuition, which we must indeed reconcile with the "rest of the 'facts,'" but which is not derived from them. From this, and not from any evidences, as the Robert Elsmeres would seem to suppose, of miraculous powers—valuable as these may be to

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

BROWNING support and prop a wavering faith—is IN PARTICULAR derived any real conviction of the necessity for the Incarnation, in whatever way we may understand the doctrine. Without this, the evidences are nothing ; with it, they are even superfluous.

In the answer that he gives to the intellectual problem, Browning addresses his own age—our age ; for the problem itself is one that is ever taking fresh forms, and needing a fresh statement of its solution. But the faith itself—realised through the emotions and the imagination as a vital fact and not a mere logical formula—is one for all time. Hence, many of the conceptions which rest on it are not more important, if we can judge the matter, for us than they will be for our great-grandchildren. This faith itself is present, equally profound and equally real, in the Hebrew boy, the Jewish Rabbi, and the Apostle ; in Karshish, and Pompilia, and Pippa ; and out of it spring those grand ideals of life and thought and action which Browning has set before us.

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For out of his conception of the BROWNING  
Divine Love springs his conception of human love ; not as a passion, not as a sentimental or romantic affection : but as the emotion which stirs the very depth of our being, which completes us here, as it finds its own completion in the life hereafter ; the witness to the divine in man. And this not only when it is crowned with bliss here, as in 'By the Fireside,' or 'Count Gismond,' but also when it fails of its reward, as in 'The Last Ride,' 'Evelyn Hope,' or 'One Way of Love.' And involved with this is the conception of life on this planet as just an episode in the soul's development. So that death is not a thing to be greatly cared for or feared, for ourselves or for others ; but is to be looked on rather as the entry upon a new phase of life where the souls that belong to each other shall find each other.

'Think, when our one soul understands  
The great Word which makes all things new,  
When earth breaks up, and heaven expands,  
How will the change strike me and you  
In the house not made with hands?

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

BROWNING  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR

Oh, I must feel your brain prompt mine,  
Your heart anticipate my heart,  
You must be just before, in fine,  
See and make me see, for your part,  
New depths of the divine !'

Another aspect of the same conception is presented in 'Prospice,' where the speaker is facing the idea of Death :

'I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,  
The best and the last ! . . . .  
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,  
The black minute's at end,  
And the elements' rage, the fiend voices that rave,  
Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,  
Then a voice, then thy breast,  
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest !'

And a third phase in 'Evelyn Hope,' where the lover stands by the side of his lost love—the girl who had died before she was old enough to *know* :

'God above  
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,  
And creates the love to reward the love ;  
I claim you still for my own love's sake.'

And this idea has its counterpart in the general attitude of the man to life.

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

Just as there is no sympathy with mere BROWNING  
sentimental longings or conventional skin-deep affections, so all slothfulness and indolence, all whining and shirking, all emotional posturing, is utterly abhorrent. Life here is a stage of development, and we have to develop ourselves body and soul to the best of our power ; and development comes of a healthy energy, a dauntless activity of heart and body and brain ; not from coddling—moral, physical, or intellectual. For courage, determination, and constancy, even misdirected, there is always hope ; the unpardonable sin is his who sets his hand to the plough and looks back. ‘Let a man contend to the uttermost for his life’s set prize, be it what it will’ ; because it is the intensity of a man’s feeling that is the measure of his capabilities, the test of the divine spark within him.

‘All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.’

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**BROWNING** So when his energies are nobly  
**IN PAR-**  
**TICULAR** directed, whether he attains or fails, the man has accomplished the task for which he was placed in this world, which is the

‘Machinery, just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.’

\*

This, then, is the most completely characteristic doctrine of Browning, the thought which is the key to poem after poem : never despair, never lose heart, never turn aside from the great aim ; because the mere failure in achievement is not in truth failure at all. ‘Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man Would do.’ ‘For what is our failure here but a triumph’s evidence for the fulness of the days ?’

It is worth being at some pains to learn that lesson.

So in Browning we have little pausing to look back and dream with a sigh of ‘The tender grace of a day that is dead’ ; none of the ‘idle tears’ for ‘the

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

days that are no more'; instead, there BROWNING  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR is a constant looking forward to an eternity of activity and development, a going from strength to strength: 'We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better.'

This is the true meaning of that 'optimism' which some people are said to find 'too robust.' In truth, the only sense of the word in which we can have an excess of it is, where we apply it to those too fortunate persons who live in a lotus-land of 'calm rest and dreamful ease,' untroubled by care themselves and ignoring the pain of others. But that is a wholly different thing from the magnificent dauntlessness which flings out Rabbi Ben Ezra's grand challenge:

'Then welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids not sit nor stand, but go !'  
*Be our joys three parts pain !*  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain !  
Learn, nor account the pang : dare, never grudge  
the throe !'

Those are not the words of one who has escaped the wear and tear of life,

## SEERS AND SINGERS

BROWNING and makes light of its rubs ; rather, no  
IN PAR-  
TICULAR man could have dared to utter them  
but one who had suffered keenly and  
endured nobly, a foremost fighter in the  
ranks of God's army.

## IV

### OUT-OF-DOORS



HERE is no less variety in the methods of looking at Nature and the wild things of the earth than in the methods of looking at men and women. And it is certain that every great poet has the out-of-door feeling on him at times.

Wordsworth, however, may fairly claim to be *par excellence* the Poet of Nature : because all that is best in his work is more vitally dependent on his love of Nature than is that of any other poet of the first rank. His mind is at the farthest remove from that of the dramatist, to whom the central interest

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OUT-OF-DOORS must always be human passion, human loves and hates ; to whom the beauty of the world is mainly a setting for the men that live and move in it. The dramatist dwells among the haunts of men ; he derives his inspiration from the rough-and-tumble of everyday life, however he may glorify it. But Wordsworth is at his happiest when the clamour of men's tongues is hushed ; when the voices of the mountains are in his ears, and overhead the

‘ broad open eye  
Of the solitary sky.’

The sense of vastness does not have the same effect upon every one, or at all times ; it is occasionally too overwhelming, and occasionally positively dreary. It has to be combined with a corresponding consciousness of supreme beauty ; and even then something more is wanting before one can derive much comfort from it. The Eternal and the Infinite are impressive ; but the Interminable is annoying. Even if Enoch

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Arden had been thoroughly, vividly conscious of the glories of his solitary island, the contemplation of boundless sea and sky would have altogether failed to soothe him, or relieve the intolerable weariness ; it would have been more likely to add to it. But that is just because ordinary human nature craves for human fellowship ; and to make solitude tolerable, it must be varied by sufficient human fellowship.

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DOORS

But, given the right conditions, the frame of mind in which vastness is not maddening but grand, Wordsworth is its high priest, its noblest interpreter.

‘ What soul was his, when from the naked top  
Of some bold headland he beheld the sun  
Rise up and bathe the world in light ! He  
looked—

Ocean and earth, the solid frame of earth  
And ocean’s liquid mass, in gladness lay  
Beneath him :—Far and wide the clouds were  
touched,

And in their silent faces could he read  
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,  
Nor any voice of joy ; his spirit drank  
The spectacle ; sensation, soul, and form  
All melted into him ; they swallowed up

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

OUT-OF-  
DOORS

His animal being ; in them did he live,  
And by them did he live ; they were his life.  
In such access of mind, in such high hour  
Of visitation from the living God,  
Thought was not ; in enjoyment it expired.  
No thanks he breathed ; he proffered no request :  
Rapt into still communion that transcends  
The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,  
His mind was a thanksgiving to the power  
That made him ; it was blessedness and love.'

This elevation of spirit, greater or less in degree, born of the contemplation of Nature in her grander aspects, is the distinguishing note of Wordsworth ; the quality which sets him apart from other poets. For his delight in beauties of detail—a lesser celandine, a daisy, a bank of daffodils—though essentially part of the man, is shared in an equal degree by many others. Stand under the canopy of heaven on a starlit night, when the moon is low ; you will draw from it a sense of power and of peace which nothing else can give. But the effect of Wordsworth's poetry is something analogous. It is the peace at the heart of the universe.

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which he felt so deeply, and has helped OUT-OF-  
DOORS so many to feel. This is the source of his own serenity, and of that 'healing power' which Arnold names as his chief gift. One is aware of it not only in passages where Nature is directly described, like the above; one feels that the same influence is at work on him all through his noblest productions. It is vividly present in the 'Intimations of Immortality'; the spirit which informs the whole of the 'Ode to Duty' is in the lines of the fifth stanza:

'Flowers laugh before thee on their beds,  
And fragrance in thy footing treads;  
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,  
And the most ancient Heavens through thee are  
fresh and strong.'

That last line leaves on your mind the consciousness that Duty—the poet's idea of Duty, that is—owes quite as much to the 'most ancient Heavens' as they owe to her.

The sonnets 'On Westminster Bridge,' 'Two voices are there,' 'The world is too much with us,' all among the noblest

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examples of Wordsworth's exalted mood, are familiar even to many whose acquaintance with the poet is limited, from their presence in anthologies ; and such lines imprint themselves on the mind with comparative readiness. But passages of the same order are far from rare, amid the monotonous wastes which all candid persons who are not devotees own to finding in the long poems—'The Excursion' and 'The Prelude.' But none, perhaps—except, it may be, the lines quoted above from 'The Excursion'—so fitly, so finely, sums up Wordsworth's attitude towards Nature, the sympathy which gives him such unrivalled power as her interpreter, as this from 'Tintern Abbey':

‘I have learned  
To look on Nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth ; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts ; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

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And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man :  
A motion and a spirit that imbues  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am  
I still

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A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains ; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth ; of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear,—both what they half create  
And what perceive.'

The influence of Nature in moulding those who love her is presented in perfection in the 'Three years she grew'; there is a touch of exaggeration, no doubt, if one presses the sense unduly, for we all know that the mere fact of rearing a child among beautiful scenery will not guarantee perfection of feature as a result; but we know and may very well recognise that the 'silent sympathy' can do a good deal towards developing a real beauty. Our souls do something towards making our bodies, and when Nature does say, 'Myself will to my darling be both law and impulse,' that goes a good way in the development of the soul. But I refer to this poem now,

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chiefly as an example of the way in which Wordsworth's love of Nature and sympathy with her penetrates through and through all his strongest feelings, and permeates them, instead of being more or less accidentally associated here or there with this or that particular thought.

We have seen how Wordsworth is affected—and we through him—by the majesty, the expanse of Nature, as bodying forth the 'something far more deeply interfused.'; how his very being is pervaded by the sense of it, so that his expression is so convincing that almost unconsciously we are raised in the reading to something like the same spiritual level. This is that kind of vivid emotional consciousness which turns formal belief into vital realisation; whereby is marked the distinction between the poet who teaches by feeling primarily, and the logician who teaches through the intellect. It is on this larger aspect of Nature—the glory of the overarching sky, the grandeur of

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the everlasting hills, the charm of the OUT-OF-DOORS  
outstretched valleys,

'The sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The winds that will be howling at all hours'—

that Wordsworth chiefly loves to dwell;  
and for this we love him most.

No doubt there is too much inclination to distort this sympathy and its expression into a system. A system may be more or less involved or implied in a fancy, but it does not do to press a fanciful phrase to its logical conclusion, and we are not bound to any metaphysical doctrines by the remark that 'tis my faith that every flower enjoys the air it breathes.' If you must analyse a phrase of that kind, it means little more than that the poet enjoys seeing the flower breathing; it is on a par almost with one's belief in fairies. There are a good many people who don't believe in fairies and fairyland—and happily there are a good many who do. These things will not bear pressing. I believe devoutly in fairies, when

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OUT-OF-DOORS the conditions are favourable; and I take it that a good many of Wordsworth's beliefs about flowers were of the same order. Still, when Mr. Morley says that the statement,

‘One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach us more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can,’

is merely a playful sally, there seems to be something wrong. Wordsworth undoubtedly felt that emotions which are at the root of morality may be stirred, and are stirred, by ‘one impulse from a vernal wood.’ That seems to be the obvious meaning of his lines ; they are not the exposition of a system ; but they are the statement of a fact.

This direct inspiration from Nature, this habit not merely of feeling how she harmonises with his graver moods, but of finding in her the actual source of his highest emotions and richest thoughts, is what especially distinguishes Wordsworth from others, even from Matthew Arnold, who is of all poets most dis-

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tinctly the product of Wordsworth, OUT-OF-DOORS most evidently influenced and moulded by his study of the master. 'Thyrsis' is the work of a man who loved the open air and knew the country-side intimately :

'Who, if not I, for questing here hath power ?  
I know the wood which hides the daffodil,  
    I know the Fysfield tree,  
I know what white, what purple fritillaries  
    The grassy harvest of the river-fields  
Above by Ensham, down by Sanford, yields,  
And what sedged brooks are Thames's tributaries.'

But though he has the feel of the country, it is a secondary thing with him ; an accompaniment ; the result less of instinct than of cultivated taste. And so his similes or illustrations derived from rural life appear with an air less of being the thing that was suggested to him by the circumstances than of being the sort of thing which he thought probably would have been suggested by similar circumstances to Homer or Virgil. I am not sure that this manner has not a charm of its own

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to the literary mind ; but it is not the living charm of green turf and blue sky. Still less is it the 'Presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts.' One has a suspicion that when Wordsworth went out on the hillside, Mr. Arnold may have done so too ; but he went with Marcus Aurelius in his pocket. Now and then we have a delicately touched picture, as of

'The mowers, who as the tiny swell  
Of our boat passing heaved the river-grass,  
Stood with suspended scythe to see us pass' ;

but the literary flavour has a habit of predominating.

The poet to whom 'the meanest flower that blows can bring thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,' was not one who forgot the parts in the whole, or inclined to despise a blossom for not being a mountain. Daffodil and daisy and small celandine, he could sing their praises as well as those of the 'glory beyond all glory ever seen,' when the mist broke on the hills. But in this field he has been often equalled

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and sometimes excelled. His daisy has not the tenderness of Burns's ; his lark falls short of the harmonious madness of Shelley's. Perhaps he found the temptation to improve the occasion too strong, except when he was too much moved to remember about it. Anyhow, most people probably find that he moralises too much over these things, and is not sufficiently content with pure enjoyment. It is rather curious that instead of being satisfied with trying to reproduce the 'impulse from the vernal wood,' he should set about trying to teach 'of moral evil and of good' after the comparatively unworthy manner of 'all the sages.' If the reputation of the primrose, at home on its own bank, were not beyond the reach of calumny, it is to be feared that it would have suffered seriously from Peter Bell.

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Robert Browning is a poet to whom nothing is of the same account as the individual man, the development of this or that particular soul. And this so outweighs all else in his work, that we

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are apt to overlook the fact that he was a keen and delighted observer and recorder of the sights and sounds of Nature—of the world in which men live, the concomitants of human life. Certainly he never wrote an ode to a skylark or a daisy; but he was very much, and joyously, aware of them, as witness, let us say, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad.' His description of the thrush is almost the only really hackneyed thing he wrote—it does duty annually in the newspaper articles. His May morning when,

'Though the fields look rough with hoary dew,  
All will be gay when noon tide wakes anew  
The buttercups, the little children's dower,'

is instinct with the very spirit of spring. Even in the 'Parleyings' there is a sunrise, characteristically different from Wordsworth's, but throbbing with the life of the new day's dawn :

'Boundingly up through night's wall dense and dark,  
Embattled crags and clouds, out broke the Sun  
Above the conscious earth, and one by one,  
Her heights and depths absorbed to the last spark

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His fluid glory, from the far fine ridge  
Of mountain-granite which, transformed to gold,  
Laughed first the thanks back, to the vale's dusk fold  
On fold of vapour-swathing, like a bridge  
Shattered beneath some giant's stamp.'

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The sunset in 'Home Thoughts from the Sea' could only have been painted by one who felt a genuine delight in its glories. But what especially marks Browning, when he does begin to talk about natural objects, is the detailed variety of what he has noticed. Nothing escapes him on a mountain walk—the

'Dark rosemary ever a-dying that, spite the  
wind's wrath,

So loves the salt rock's face to seaward,'

or the

'Fairy-cupped, elf-needled mat of moss,'

no more than

'How sharp the silver spear-heads charge,  
Where Alps meets heaven in snow.'

The lover in the 'Lost Mistress' remarks how

'The leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,  
' I noticed that to-day;  
One day more bursts them open fully—  
You know, the red turns grey.'

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The triviality of the matter is hardly more pathetic than its accuracy, in the context. There is rather a curious difference between Wordsworth and Browning which is worth noting—the former has a vivid sense of what Mr. Morley calls an Animated Presence in the mountains and woods ; but Browning has a way of speaking of them as individually alive :

'The forests had done it ; there they stood ;  
We caught for a moment the powers at play..  
They had mingled us so for once and good,  
Their work was done—we might go or stay,  
They relapsed to their ancient mood.'

No doubt it is the outcome of the stress the poet always does lay on individuality, while Wordsworth dwells rather on the unity of the whole. It would be a rather curious study to try and trace whether Browning's delight in detail and Wordsworth's delight in expanse are attributable to the same sources.

The younger poet was only incidentally a poet of Nature—reversing the

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phrase about loving 'not man the less.' He is so much more interested in men and women ; but his own intense vitality gives him a joyous sympathy with all that has life, and all that gives life. Apart from his acute observation, the out-of-door feeling, the physical exhilaration (not the Wordsworthian moral elevation) of being in the open is very marked in him. His horse-back poems have it, of course ; 'James Lee's Wife' is chiefly readable—I speak for myself — because of it ; but perhaps it reaches about its highest pitch in the out-door bit of 'Pauline,' at the lines :

'Blue sunny air, where a great cloud floats laden  
With light. . . .  
Air, air, fresh life-blood, thin and searching air,  
The clear dear breath of God that loveth us,  
Where small birds reel, and winds take their  
delight !  
Water is beautiful, but not like air.'

As might be expected, the Laureate stands somewhat as a link between the two in his way of looking at Nature.

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She is more intimately bound up with his thoughts than with Browning's, but is less exclusively responsible for the best of them than with Wordsworth. He presents her with an accuracy and an unfailing felicity of phrase unrivalled except by the universal rival Shakspeare, and by Keats. He can be lavish in joyous detail, as in 'Enoch Arden'; but he can call up a complete picture in a couple of lines :

' What sound was dearest in his native dells ?  
The mellow lin-lan-lone of evening bells,  
Far-far-away.'

There is a whole landscape in that, or in such a phrase as 'the long grey fields at night' (in the 'May Queen'), just as clear as Wordsworth gives us in 'Tintern Abbey.' He has, above all, the art of putting clearly before you the salient features which of themselves suggest the background ; the art of not saying the superfluous thing ; so that in a few lines you have a picture of infinite suggestiveness. The scene of

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the Passing of Arthur is a perfect piece OUT-OF-DOORS of painting, with its ruined chapel :

'A broken chancel with a broken cross,  
That stood on a dark strait of barren land ;  
On one side lay the ocean, and on one  
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.'

There Sir Bedivere left the King, and

'From the ruined shrine he stepped,  
And in the moon athwart the place of tombs,  
Where lay the mighty bones of ancient men,  
Old knights, and over them the sea-wind rang.  
Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping  
down,  
By zig-zag paths, and juts of pointed rock,  
Came on the shining levels of the lake' :

and so

'Heard the water lapping on the crag,  
And the long ripple washing in the reeds.'

In this purely picturesque treatment of Nature, Tennyson's mastery of happy phrase, though at times the hypercritical may feel it a trifle forced, aids his artistic skill in selecting what needs to be presented to make the picture which he wishes you to see, so as to produce an extraordinarily visible effect. But

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you feel in such a case as this that the scene was painted for the sake of the story enacted in it. Whereas in Wordsworth, if you got such a fine piece of painting, you would feel that if anything was going on, it was a superfluous thing to which you needn't pay much attention—the scene itself would be the important matter. On the other hand, 'The Higher Pantheism' is not in the least Wordsworthian, but it is the outcome of a comparatively Wordsworthian way of looking at Nature: not the mood of the painter, or of the dramatic artist in search of a suitable background; but of one contemplating the embodied glories of the universe, and endeavouring to realise the Eternal Being shadowed forth in them.

But it is in that close observation, without which it would be impossible to attain such perfection of presentment, such felicity in the application of descriptive epithets, that the Laureate excels; as of the eagle who 'clasps the rock with crooked hands,' or the 'sea-

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blue bird of March.' In this particular respect the difference between his method and Browning's seems to lie somewhat in this—that what Tennyson *records* is the thing that the rest of the world has half-noticed ; what is only vaguely a part of the picture or idea in their minds, but forces the whole into vivid view when brought before them in a flash ; whereas what Browning records is apt to be the thing that ordinary folk have not noticed at all. We are commonly more pleased by such a line as 'the earliest pipe of half-awakened birds,' than by being reminded that the thrush 'sings each song twice over,' or that the cuckoo's cry is sometimes in a minor third. Both of them use their reminiscences of Nature by way of casual allusion or illustration ; but scenery, birds, flowers, are much oftener in the mind of the Laureate, and are set before us in more familiar guise.

OUT-OF-  
DOORS

If it is the majesty of Nature that most of all impresses itself on the mind of Wordsworth, and her vitality that

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most strikes Browning, it is in her every-day garb of quiet beauty that Tennyson chiefly loves to present her ; it is in the pastoral and the idyll that we find his most characteristic delineations—as indeed it is in such pieces that his most distinctive work is generally to be looked for. One *may* doubt the permanent interest of King Arthur and his knights ; one may question the philosophic merits of 'Vastness,' and the value of 'Despair' ; but while summer suns are warm, and woodland breezes are fragrant, it is difficult to imagine that such verses as these will lose their delight :

All the land in flowery squares  
Beneath a broad and equal-blowing wind,  
Smelt of the coming summer, as one large cloud  
Drew downward ; but all else of heaven was pure  
Up to the sun, and May from verge to verge,  
And May with me from head to heel. And now  
As tho' 'twere yesterday, as though it were  
The hour just flown, that morn with all its sound,  
(For those old Mays had thrice the life of these),  
Rings in mine ears. The steer forgot to graze,  
And where the hedge-row cuts the pathways, stood  
Leaning his horns into the neighbour field,  
And lowing to his fellows. From the woods  
Came voices of the well-contented doves.

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The lark could scarce get out his notes for joy,  
But shook his song together as he neared  
His happy home, the ground. To left and right  
The cuckoo told his name to all the hills ;  
The mellow ouzel fluted in the elm ;  
The red-cap whistled ; and the nightingale  
Sang loud as tho' he were the bird of day.'

OUT-OF-DOORS

*Apropos* of the last line, by the way, it is interesting to note the manful disregard of that poetic tradition which insists on making the female bird the musician. It is rather difficult to understand why the 'Philomel' theory has taken such hold on the literary imagination. Probably the pensive associations of the evening hour are largely responsible; for the nightingale's song in broad day is not very suggestive of a 'plaint.' Wordsworth and Tennyson have both been more regardful of the fact than of the tradition.

In this connection we may remark the Laureate's peculiarly felicitous rendering of the voices of birds, as in the much misunderstood 'Throstle':

'Summer is coming, Summer is coming,  
I know it, I know it, I know it.'

## SEERS AND SINGERS

OUT-OF-DOORS

I shall have occasion later on to quote another very striking instance from 'Maud,' the point of which is often overlooked, though it might be considered sufficiently obvious.

But if we want to feel the poet's real and constant intimacy with Nature, we shall perhaps find it most convincingly presented, not so much in his deliberate description of scenes, whether chiefly for their own sakes (as in the 'Gardener's Daughter'), or for their effect as accessories (as in the 'Passing of Arthur'), as in the incidental touches which serve to illustrate some idea with which they are only imaginatively associated.

'Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me !  
And may there be no moaning of the bar  
When I put out to sea.'

'But *such a tide as moving seems asleep,*  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless  
deep  
Turns again home.'

## V

'THE RING AND THE  
BOOK'

T would be an interesting subject for inquiry, what proportion of the British public is prepared to face a really long poem. Browning's popularity has increased enormously in the last few years: but even among those who are thoroughly at home in the selections there are probably large numbers who have never attempted to read 'The Ring and the Book,' and large numbers also who have never got beyond the first book.

It is not surprising that this should be so; because for some reason or

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK' other a long poem, whoever the author may be, is rather alarming. And 'The Ring and the Book' is a very long poem; with print enough in it to make up quite a good-sized, three-volume novel; longer than the 'Iliad' or the 'Æneid'; longer than any English poem by a master hand, except the 'Faerie Queene.' On a hasty estimate, it appears that 'Don Juan' and 'Paradise Lost' are only about three-fourths of its length, 'The Excursion' about half. It would probably afford some food for reflection, if we could ascertain precisely how many per million of the population have read either 'Paradise Lost' or 'The Excursion' right through even once. As for the numbers who have read both right through twice, except perhaps for really professional purposes —well, they wouldn't need the Albert Hall to hold them.

In fact, it does not take much consideration to show that a very long poem has practically no chance of being popular. It is a pity. There are a

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

good many things, in 'The Excursion' "THE RING  
for instance, which are worth the trouble AND THE  
of digging for. However, there is the BOOK"  
fact. But it is worth while trying to  
persuade a few more people to make up  
their minds to read 'The Ring and the  
Book,' although I am inclined to believe  
that, considering its size and the unpro-  
mising character of the first books, it  
has already found a quite surprising  
number of admirers.

Let us begin by examining the case  
against the poem—merely premising  
that what is an obstacle to the general  
reader is not necessarily a legitimate  
ground of critical objection—for it is  
no use to make light of obstacles, or  
to deny that they exist when they are  
staring you in the face.

To start with, then, there is the length  
of the poem. If people shrink back  
before the length of 'Paradise Lost,'  
they can hardly be expected to regard  
'The Ring and the Book' with equani-  
mity. Nevertheless, the objection on  
the score of length is a little unreason-

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'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK' able. It is very nearly a matter of course that a novel should be in three volumes ; nobody shrinks from reading one of Mr. Besant's books because there is such a lot to get through ; nay, there are plenty of people who think that unless in prose a story is told in three volumes it can only be 'a book for boys' or 'a book for girls.' No doubt the poet demands a higher pitch of attention, but there seems to be no adequate reason for making so marked a distinction between the amount of verse and of prose that one is prepared to face.

Secondly, the scheme of the book is against it ; that is, it sounds as if it must be exhausting to have the same story told a dozen times over, partly by the actors in it, partly by lookers-on. The poet takes a story, nowise a pretty one, abounding in cruelty, deception, and bloodshed, unredeemed by any act of heroic self-sacrifice ; gives you the bare outline of the complicated facts ; and then sets nine different people to

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tell you how the facts strike them. If 'THE RING AND THE BOOK' the interest of the book lay in the story itself, the method of telling it would certainly be thoroughly inartistic ; but it does not. It lies in the characters of the actors and the speakers ; the motives by which they are stirred ; the heights and depths of human passion, of nobility and degradation, which they gauge : so that the last speaker is not a whit the less interesting because he comes at the end ; and what is more, you feel at the end that by no other method could the same completeness of vision have been attained.

There is, however, from the point of view of a reader coming to 'The Ring and the Book' for the first time, a particular obstacle inherent in the scheme of the poem : namely, that the opening books are the least inviting. When once you know the poem, you know that each of the parts is in its proper place, and there is sound artistic reason for the arrangement ; but it does at first tend to make one give up the attempt

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE RING to read. The views expressed by the AND THE BOOK' onlookers, who represent the general public, have to precede the more illuminating discourses of the three principals in the drama ; but in the nature of things they are not so interesting as the latter. In the nature of things, also, the poet's own introduction suffers from a certain baldness. Yet it was hardly necessary—and this is a critical fault as well as an obstacle to the general reader—that Browning should have written that first book, as he seems to have done, in a mood of defiance towards the 'British Public, you who like me not,' which led him to indulge with exceptional freedom in those idiosyncrasies of style, sudden colloquialisms, and allusive forms of expression, which are responsible for the popular impression that nobody can really enjoy him, and that the pretence of doing so is a mere affectation.

But now let us examine this trouble of 'Browningese' a little more closely ; for it appears to me that the defect is one

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which has been gravely exaggerated, 'THE RING AND THE BOOK' and that some of the poet's most devoted admirers are in no small degree responsible. If you really cannot be expected to appreciate Browning without having the illumination of lectures from a society ; and if, when your society is dissolved, you can't get along without a cyclopædia specially designed to make him intelligible ; if, after years of reading, you need all this—why, clearly you can hardly complain if people say that Browning may be very fine, but the game isn't worth the candle. The truth is, that all this paraphernalia of interpretation, useful as it may be for specific purposes and in specific cases, tends greatly to force into prominence whatever is obscure and difficult in the poet's work ; to make one tackle him in the spirit which should be reserved for studying the Secret of Hegel or a corrupt chorus in *Æschylus* ; to thrust into the background the simple fact that, outside of one or two of the early poems and a few late ones, most of

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

'THE RING Browning is plain sailing enough, or  
AND THE made difficult mainly by the unexpected  
BOOK' character of an idea—and an unexpected  
idea is always difficult to grasp at first  
sight — the suddenness with which a  
fresh point of view is caught, or the  
depth of the thought presented.

Now, we all know that we can live peacefully with a clock ticking until the unhappy hour comes when somebody calls attention to it, and the everlasting tick gets on our nerves, though it may be a perfectly harmless, well-conducted tick all the time. Well, in just the same way, if somebody stirs you up and gets you to be perpetually on the look-out for difficulties, the difficulties will turn up of themselves where it would never have occurred to you to be troubled by them. Once I made an unfortunate discovery in a book which I greatly admire and once enjoyed. It is a novel : but I found that most of it runs into metre. I can't read it now without getting frenzied by the tick, tick of the metrical parts, and the desire to make

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the other sentences scan too. The habit of talking about the 'difficulties' in Browning has a precisely similar effect: everything that you don't recognise at first sight makes you feel fidgety, and you fancy that every casual allusion is the key to a hidden inner meaning; whereas the plain, palpable meaning is staring you in the face. In 'The Ring and the Book' there are two typical problems of this preposterous order which have evoked reams of correspondence. One refers to 'the sole joke in Thucydides,' and the other to 'The Tract *de Tribus*.' One would have gathered from the papers that these two little puzzles made a vital difference to the interpretation of the poem. Somebody has solved them with more or less plausibility, I believe; but neither puzzle nor solution matters a solitary straw. The point of the passage in each case is perfectly clear without any application of erudition. When Lord Tennyson makes an allusion, it doesn't strike us

'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

‘THE KING to inquire whether he is thinking of a  
AND THE  
BOOK’ passage in Apuleius : at least, it didn’t until an erudite critic wrote a book to show that the Laureate never says anything to which you can’t find a passage more or less parallel, or, anyhow, in some degree similar, somewhere in somebody or other. As long as people come to Browning with a steady resolution to find things they can’t understand, those things will manufacture themselves with surprising readiness.

Still, when all is said and done, it must be admitted that Browning is not always easy to follow at sight, though it is easy to make too much of the difficulties, and easy also to forget that we don’t always take in exactly what Shakespeare, or Milton, or Wordsworth, or Tennyson mean, without thinking about it pretty hard. That bit of Lycidas, for instance, which Ruskin examines in ‘Sesame and Lilies’—what problems and what solutions might have been extracted from that, if only Browning had written it ! Of course, there are

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allusions, and reminiscences of other writers, which convey a quite erroneous impression until we have detected what was in the poet's mind. For instance, in 'Old Pictures in Florence,' he calls Margheritone of Arezzo

'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'

'You bald old saturnine poll-clawed parrot,'

which I will venture to say that every one misinterprets—not that it matters much—until he remembers 2 Henry IV..

'Look if the hoary elder have not his poll clawed like a parrot.'

'Saturn and Venus in conjunction!'

But, speaking broadly, it may fairly be said that the mere difficulties of style and expression in Browning are nothing like so great as they are often made out to be; and in view of the good you can get by setting them at defiance, it is positively foolish to be daunted by them.

Nevertheless, in the first book of this great work, Browning does seem to have gone out of his way to indulge in every practice for which critics had

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

THE RING reproached him. It is the natural inclination of any man who feels himself addressing a hostile audience whom he does not care to conciliate. There is compensation in some very noble passages ; but there is some justification for feeling exhausted by the time you are nearing the end, when the grand invocation to his wife bursts upon you suddenly like sunlight breaking through a storm almost :

'O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—  
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,  
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,  
And sang a kindred soul out to his face—  
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—  
When the first summons from the darkling earth  
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched  
their blue,  
And bared them of their glory—to drop down,  
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—  
This is the same voice ; can thy soul know change?  
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help !'

And so to the end ; and even here it is possible to be puzzled if you fail to observe that in line 5 'kindred' means 'kindred to the sun,' and 'his face' 'the

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sun's face.' But this is not, in truth, a 'THE RING  
kind of obscurity which we are justified  
in objecting to, because the phrase, when  
it *is* understood, conveys the sense with  
a perfection otherwise unattainable.

So ends the prologue, in which the poet tells how he came upon the story, the dry bones of it, in the old report of a trial ; how, as he meditated on it, the dry bones became alive, and by the application of the alloy of his thought, his fancy, it became possible to mould the gold of the facts into an artistic whole, a ring, through and through the pure gold of Truth.

Next we hear the story as coloured by the representatives amongst the outside public of the two factions which are called into being by any great trial : men with superficial knowledge of the facts, judging them in the light of the kind of superficial acquaintance with average human nature which we all possess ; the one—the married man—having a natural bias to accept the husband's version ; the other, the un-

## 'SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE KING  
AND THE  
BOOK' married man, with an equally natural bias in favour of youth and beauty in distress. The unconscious skill with which each of them, giving himself credit all the time for merely drawing quite indisputable inferences from obvious facts, shirks the points which do not fall in comfortably with his preconceived theory, and proves entirely to his own satisfaction that nothing but the most grotesque wrong-headedness could possibly account for anybody taking a different view, forms a truly admirable exposition of ordinary human nature, and of the common method of setting about finding truth—namely, to decide first what we want to be true, and then squeeze the facts into the theory. There was a gentleman who thought he could settle the problem of squaring the circle by filling a vessel with shot. But he forgot the chinks. The facts will generally fit into a theory if you forget the chinks. The two speakers belong to a single intellectual and moral type ; but it is only by the con-

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trast between them that the type itself 'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'

More entertaining, but somewhat irritating, is the speaker of Book iv., 'Tertium Quid,' the man who prides himself on the nicety of his critical discrimination ; a superior person, who moves amongst Excellencies, and has the lowest opinion of all meaner folk ; a cynic of the basest order. His chief difficulty in arriving at a decision on any given point lies in the necessity for admitting that if the one party is as black as you would like to believe, the other must be a great deal whiter than—with your subtle knowledge of human depravity—you can credit for a moment. His sympathies are with the husband, as a matter of policy, as being of a noble house ; but he cannot go so far as to believe that even the husband was much better than the worst you can picture him. In the result he leaves every question open, though—as a matter of policy—favouring the Count's acquittal.

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'

It may be an heretical opinion, but I should incline to advise people coming to 'The Ring and the Book' for the first time to pass over these three books after mastering Book I., and proceed direct to the three which follow, the speeches of the three chief actors in the tragedy. For it is in their character that the interest of the whole centres. Hitherto we have only had them presented by people who at best only half understand them, and it is possible to be bored by 'The Half Rome,' 'The Other Half Rome,' and 'Tertium Quid.' In any one who has not learnt by experience how thoroughly worth while it is to refuse to be daunted by the initial difficulties, and who is not endowed with a more than average interest in psychological problems, these three books are apt to produce a distaste for further investigation, a disinclination to keep up the close attention which is necessary to full appreciation. But if you come to Count Guido comparatively fresh, the interest chains you at

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once. For Guido is a villain of an intensely dramatic (not melodramatic) type, whose nearest parallel in English literature is to be found in Iago. Plausible, persuasive, shifty, with just the occasional appearance of being carried away by righteous indignation, the air of an honest victim first of his supreme regard for law, and secondly, of a high-souled illegality when duty to his kind bade him overstep the limits of law—he stands before his judges; leaving no stone unturned to save the life for which he is fighting desperately, yet failing utterly to convince. For he fawns the least trifle too palpably; his righteous indignation is a fraction overdone—just enough to set the stamp of insincerity on the whole performance. The skill with which he lies is consummate; but you never feel a doubt that he is lying.

And then in splendid contrast comes Caponsacchi, magnificently sincere alike in his vindication of what he had done, and in his self-reproach for what he had

'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**'THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'** not done, with never a thought of himself, how he would look, what would be deemed of him ; only always before him 'the wonderful white soul,' the pure pale face with 'the beautiful, sad, strange smile' of the girl who had been to him a revelation of the pettiness, the pitiful inefficiency of his own life, the grandeur of what life may be. Mercilessly the tempestuous, scornful words smite the judges, who had counted for the jest of a gallant the most sacred experience of his life—passionate words in fine contrast to the pathos of these which follow :

'Why, had there been in me the touch of taint,  
I had picked up so much knave's-policy  
As hide it, keep one hand pressed on the place  
Suspected of a spot would damn us both.  
Or no, not her !—not even if any of you  
Dares think that I, i' the face of death, her death  
That 's in my eyes and ears and brain and heart,  
Lie—if he does, let him ! I mean to say,  
So he stop there, stay thought from smirching her,  
*The snow-white soul that angels fear to take*  
*Untenderly.*'

It is not that the man had done any-

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thing on the face of it heroic. There was no great self-sacrifice in his act; only he had dared to understand what he was called upon to do—to face a tremendous temptation which he might have shirked; and had passed through it not scatheless only, but purified and ennobled, as one who has looked upon the San Greal. He had learnt his lesson, and attained to the joy that is three parts pain. To realise with your whole soul what holiness means is an experience worth a good deal of suffering.

The dramatic force of the whole speech is admirable. It is the unprepared sincerity of it, the bursts of fierce indignation, the depths of tenderness, the passionate humility, which make it irresistible; and last, but not least, the moment of gathered calm, of controlled resignation, at the close, suddenly breaking into the one last sob of overwhelming anguish :

‘O great, just, good God ! Miserable me !’

From him we turn to the self-revelation

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE RING of the 'wonderful white soul,' Pompilia,  
AND THE  
BOOK' on her deathbed, with kind faces and tender hands about her for once, and the noble head of the Augustinian in the background—a picture of innocence that nothing could smirch, of faith that never dreamed of wavering, of courage that no suffering could quell, of charity which could forgive the worst of wrong, such as I know not where else to find. From the first line to the last, whether she is recalling some memory of childhood, or something in that dream of desolateness which has become to her so shadowy and unreal ; or letting her thoughts turn to contemplate the noble spirit of the man who had tried to save her, and speaking them with the fearless sincerity of stainless innocence ; all is lighted up with a light not of this world. She is passing to the substance from the shadows, to the light from the darkness, from the strangeness and confusion to knowledge. Through all the tenderness and the pathos, the pain and the pity and the childlike trustfulness,

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there runs a note of victory. I think it 'THE RING  
is just from the stainlessness of her AND THE  
soul that one feels it; for these lines BOOK'  
are among the last—some of them are  
the very last—spoken by this child,  
this seventeen-year-old girl, into whose  
short span of life enough misery had  
been crowded to furnish forth a score  
of ordinary octogenarians:

'O lover of my life, O soldier saint,  
No work begun shall ever pause for death!  
Love will be helpful to me more and more  
I' the coming course, the new path I must tread,  
My weak hand in Thy strong hand, strong for that!

• • •  
So, let him wait God's instant men call years;  
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,  
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone  
God stooping shows sufficient of His light  
For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.'

The two lawyers who follow supply  
the element of comedy for which we are  
not ungrateful. And it is decidedly a  
stroke of artistic skill which gives the  
joyful Don Giacinto, with his genial  
mind running on his little boy's birth-

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE KING day, while he proves white black, to be  
~~AND THE~~ Guido's counsel; while the defence of  
BOOK' Pompilia is intrusted to Bottini, who is  
absolutely devoid of any capacity for  
understanding her—who is, in fact, on  
about the same moral level as the critic  
in 'Tertium Quid,' and takes his stand  
wholly and solely on legal technicalities.  
But both the lawyers are wearisome;  
Don Giacinto is exceedingly  
entertaining for some time, but he  
palls, and the amount of canine Latin  
he talks is exhausting. And Bottini is  
too contemptible to be tolerable for  
long. But after the tension of the  
three great speeches these come as  
something of a relief before the wise,  
judicial deliverance of the Pope, in  
whom, as in Pompilia, shines some-  
thing of that fore-gleam of light from  
the other world to whose threshold he  
stands so near.

Of this book of 'The Pope' I find it  
singularly difficult to speak. It is so  
full of understanding, of insight, of sym-  
pathy, so tender yet so unfaltering, so

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utterly free from cant or commonplace methods of shirking the eternal problems, and withal so reverent and so fearless. If I begin to pick out passages I can hardly stop. Take this, for instance, from his picture of Pompilia : ‘THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK’

‘ Everywhere  
I see in the world the intellect of man,  
That sword ; the energy, his subtle spear ;  
The knowledge which defends him like a shield ;  
**Everywhere**—but they make not up, I think,  
The marvel of a soul like thine, earth’s flower  
She holds up to the softened gaze of God.’

Or this, as he meditates on the part Caponsacchi had played :

‘ Was the trial sore,  
Temptation sharp ? Thank God a second time !  
*Why comes temptation but for man to meet  
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,*  
And so be pedestalled in triumph ? Pray ..  
“ Lead us into no such temptation, Lord ! ”  
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,  
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,  
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,  
That so he may do battle and have praise ! ’

There is no particular reason why these passages should be quoted, rather

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

'THE RING than a dozen others no less fine, no  
AND THE less penetrating, no less rich with all  
book' wisdom.

Not least at the end does the Pope show his insight with the words :

'So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,  
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.'

For the second 'Guido'—Guido at bay, turning on his fellows and cursing them and God, as he lays his own soul bare before the priests sent to receive his confession—is about as lurid as anything well could be. He is an utter coward, with the cowardice that has no spark to redeem it ; but he is a coward turned desperate, and the fear and the fury are about equal. Mostly the fury predominates till the finishing moment arrives, and then the fear, sheer terror of death, carries the day. Only in the last line do we get the sudden revelation that he had known good from evil, that he knew his wife for what she was, the means of grace which had been offered to him and spurned by him. In

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

that last despairing cry the truth flashes '**THE RING  
AND THE  
BOOK'**  
from him :

'Abate—Cardinal—Christ—Maria—God—  
*Pompilia*, will you let them murder me?'

The last book is in fact epilogue ; it tells something more of the fate of surviving actors in the drama, and rounds all off with something of explanation, and something of a moral. A book must be finished off somehow, and this finishing off—unavoidably, perhaps—has some of the baldness and poorness of the First Book. Yet there is in it a passage—the Augustinian's sermon—which may well be set beside some of the finest parts of 'The Pope' without suffering in the comparison.

My purpose in this chapter has chiefly been to induce some of those who have not already read 'The Ring and the Book' to do so at an early opportunity. I believe that it is the function of the Higher Criticism not to seek for beauty, except in what is essentially ugly, but rather to set about proving that if any-

## SEERS AND SINGERS

'THE KING thing seems beautiful the supposition is  
AND THE sure to be 'bourgeois.' So many people  
BOOK,' find satisfaction in Browning nowadays,  
that admiration for him is becoming a  
mark of Philistinism. We may hope  
that the number of Philistines is still  
susceptible of increase.

## VI

## DRAMATIC POEMS



O define what you mean by 'dramatic' is not easy at the best of times, perhaps what I mean by a dramatic poem just now is more than anything else a poem which aims at expressing a character or characters; whereas the captious may remark that I *ought* to mean one which expresses an action. And forthwith there is opened out an interminable vista of arguments as to what constitutes an action, which might be entertaining to the arguers, but would be distinctly irritating to every one else. So we will take the argument

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DRAMATIC POEMS for granted, and proceed on Humpty Dumpty's principles, when he explained that by 'glory' he meant 'a nice knock-down argument.'

Now, what we commonly mean by a drama is a poem which takes the form of dialogue : which would limit us unduly—apart from the fact that you can have the dialogue form without the poem being really dramatic in the sense intended. Browning's 'A Forgiveness,' for instance, would be shut out ; and Empedocles on Etna, which is really a poem of meditation, would be included. As usual, you cannot really draw a scientific line, any more than you can say how many grains of sand make a heap. The accuracy of the application of the term 'dramatic' may be questioned, but its present convenience is more important.

Periodically an old discussion crops up as to whether a play can possibly be a good play unless it is good to put on the stage. It would seem to be merely a question of words. If a play is in-

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tended for the footlights, but is not DRAMATIC POEMS adapted to them, it obviously fails in its purpose. But supposing it was not written for the footlights—that is, not written under conditions which suit it to the boards of a London theatre? The rule would land one in the curious paradox that Sophocles was not a writer of good plays. He wrote plays that were adapted for scenic representation before an Athenian audience, and which can still fill a small theatre for nearly a week at Oxford or Cambridge; but the stage manager who tried to put a translation, say of the 'Electra,' before a London audience would make a considerable loss out of his venture. A story may be told in the form of dialogue, with the paraphernalia of acts and scenes, and very well told, too; if you choose to say that it is not a good play because it won't 'act,' you may; but it is a good *something*; and if the term 'play' is forbidden, what are you to do? What are you to call it?

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Three of our poets have written plays —for Wordsworth's 'Borderers' hardly claims serious consideration. As stage performances, Arnold's 'Merope' is obviously impossible, as it is simply an imitation of the Greek play, utterly unadapted to modern arrangements ; Browning's would, in all probability, be absolute failures ; Tennyson's alone are perhaps capable of really holding the stage as acting plays ; and they need to be put on as elaborately as Mr. Irving can do it. Yet in the strength of the characters drawn, in moral and emotional interest, the 'Cup' will not for a moment stand comparison with, say, 'Strafford,' while such a piece as 'Robin Hood' is a bit of prettiness, a pastoral, a masque ; it is not a drama, for it has neither story nor characters.

Superficial emotions are readily caught and sympathised with ; vehemence carries one away much more readily than concentration ; it is much more effective, at sight, to be touching than to be heart-breaking. If you know your

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Shakspeare intimately, a noble interpretation by a great actor will appeal to you throughout ; if you do *not* know him well—if you go to the theatre just to get an idea of the play—it is the superficial effects that will appeal to you. Shakspeare's range of sympathies is so wide that the superficialities are as skilfully presented as the rest, and you can feel as if you had seen a good play, when to some one who knows it the effective rendering of the minor points may have altogether failed to compensate for the hopelessly inadequate treatment of the greater parts. A clever actor may make Shakspeare popular, even when his impersonation makes the critic feel most vividly that Shakspeare on the stage is spoilt ; and a great actor, whose energies are concentrated on the nobler parts, may fail because the significance, to an uncritical audience, of the slighter parts is overlooked. That is to say, that Shakspeare was a great stage-play writer, but his real, greatest greatness is not recognisable in

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DRAMATIC the hurry of a stage performance. In  
POEMS Tennyson's plays, the chances are that the best there is in them will be shown on the stage. In Browning's, the minor interests are insufficient for stage popularity, the greater interests are on that higher level of intensity with which intimacy alone can place you in real sympathy. To an audience already intimate with 'Strafford,' an artistic stage rendering of it would be delightful: to any one else it would be—a bore.

For the central figure in Browning's 'Strafford,' which may conveniently be regarded as a typical drama of his, belongs to a class which he is fond of treating, and with which it requires a certain effort to bring oneself in sympathy: a character essentially noble, but which has suffered a wrench, and is driven to the adoption of naturally alien methods in consequence. Wentworth, endowed with strength, courage, and intense loyalty, with every quality befitting a leader, and devoted to the cause of liberty, becomes a sudden apos-

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tate, the champion of the very king who is endeavouring to abolish liberty altogether. Whether the picture Browning has given is one which can be reconciled with the approved facts is a question which does not concern us, any more than whether Richard III. was a hunch-back. The facts for the playwright may be fictions. The problem is to reconcile Strafford the Apostate with Wentworth the Patriot. The key to the situation lies in Wentworth's overwhelming personal devotion to the king ; its supreme tragedy in his knowledge of that king's utter baseness.

'What, the face was masked ?  
I had the heart to see, sir ! Face of flesh,  
But heart of stone—of smooth, cold, frightful  
stone !'

Terrible words to have hurled at you, when every word is blazing with truth. Yet they are hardly out of Strafford's mouth when he turns on the Commons' deputation, and claims for himself the responsibility for the very measures

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**DRAMATIC POEMS** he had loathed, which the king had adopted in his absence by the advice of his worst enemies. To save this man from his own folly and the intrigues of the self-seeking courtiers, Wentworth attempted the impossible: desperately striving to win him to act reasonably and wisely; and—his advice accepted time after time only to be flung aside and trampled on by the Saviles and Vanes—desperately drawing on himself the odium for the acts he hated, and plunging into a new hopeless effort to retrieve the disaster which his own policy would have averted. Never, be it noted, is it Strafford's aim to carry out the policy of the Queen and the Court party, which is the establishment of an absolute monarchy ; he seeks only to save Charles from the destruction which must be the only possible termination of that policy. Very pathetic, too, is the irony which keeps Strafford all unconscious of the love that lives for him in one human heart ; that blindness, born of his love for the king, which

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allows him to be deceived into taking DRAMATIC  
Lady Carlisle's superficial Court-beauty-  
manners\* for the true expression of her. POEMS

'That voice of hers—  
You'd think she had a heart, sometimes. *His voice*  
*Is soft too.*'

At the same time, it is easy enough to see that such a play as this could hardly be popular: hardly find even any very large number of interested readers. There is no relief, no relaxation of the emotional tension. Unless one is familiar with the whole history of Charles's reign, it is not easy to follow the conversation of the Parliamentarian leaders. Unless you have already grasped Strafford's character very thoroughly, the sudden changes of passion, e.g. in Act II., scene 2, are bewildering. I have quoted from that scene above; let me quote another passage from it before we leave the play. Strafford, about to undertake the new task that the king's last, worst blunder has forced upon him, is alone with Lady

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

DRAMATIC POEMS Carlisle, 'the slight graceful girl, tall for a flowering lily':

'Straf.' Ah ! you know ?  
Well. I shall make a sorry soldier, Lucy !  
All knights begin their enterprise, we read,  
Under the best of auspices : 'tis morn,  
The Lady girds his sword upon the Youth  
(He's always very young)—the trumpets sound,  
Cups pledge him and, why, the king blesses him--  
You need not turn a page of the romance  
To learn the Dreadful Giant's fate. Indeed,  
We've the fair lady here : but she apart,—  
A poor man rarely having handled lance,  
And rather old, weary, and far from sure  
His squires are not the Giant's friends. All's one.  
Let us go forth.

*Lady C.* Go forth ?  
*Straf.* What matters it !  
We shall die gloriously—as the book says.

The king stood there, 'tis not so long ago,  
—There ; and the whisper, Lucy, "Be my friend  
Of friends !" —My king ! I would have . . .

*Lady C.* Died for him ?  
*Straf.* Sworn him true, Lucy. I can—die  
for him.'

That last line seems to me to sum the whole tragedy. The entire play is sombre, terrible : but for the heroic heart in the chief character, it would be

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almost dreary ; as it is, the pain of it is DRAMATIC  
less than the grandeur. POEMS

The main characteristics of Strafford mark most of Browning's plays : notably the continuous strain of emotions at a high pitch of intensity, and with very little relief ; and the complexity of motive in the principal personages. Luria, by the way, differs from the rest in this respect, most of the characters being actuated almost entirely by some one dominating purpose ; but even there, except in the case of the Moor himself, the purpose — different with each one—has by each one to be carefully concealed, so that the difficulty of finding out the point of view, and so following the working of the different minds, remains. In fact, the chances are that no actors could make a Browning play fully intelligible to an audience who had not studied the text first.

It is curious to turn from these plays, with their freedom from convention, their formal roughness, their *Sturm und Drang*, to Matthew Arnold's 'Merope,'

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**DRAMATIC** with its statuesque figures, its conventional emotions, its clear, musical, regulated expression. The beauty shows so differently that one is almost tempted to say that if present in one it cannot be present in the other. There is in fact no comparison, as presentations of living human beings, between the strong, passionate souls of Browning's dramas and the graceful, carefully draped forms of 'Merope,' with their neatly turned proverbs in the Greek manner. Indeed, one would have little difficulty in believing that 'Merope' really was a translation, so skilful is the imitation ; but, for whatever reason, it fails to produce the effect of an original. The characters all talk very like the people in a Greek play—but in the real thing they are alive ; and in Matthew Arnold they are not. All the same, you cannot read without recognising that the work has a beauty of its own apart from the mere metrical and verbal craftsmanship it displays ; but it is the beauty, not of flesh and blood, but of marble.

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'Merope,' however, is a solitary ex- DRAMATIC  
periment. Arnold's strong point did  
not lie in his character-drawing—which  
is pretty nearly the same as saying, in  
the strength and range of his human  
sympathies. But the Laureate, within  
certain limits, is a master in this re-  
spect. The limits are not very wide,  
but that does not affect the perfection  
of the workmanship within them. The  
'Northern Farmer,' for instance—old  
style :

'But Parson a comes an' a goos, an' a says it easy  
an' freeä.

"The amoightly's a taakin' o' you to 'issen', my  
friend," says 'eä.

I weänt saay men be loiars, thaw summun said it  
in 'äste :

But 'e reäds wonn sarmin a weeäk, an' I 'a stuhh'd  
Thurnalby waäste.

'Do godamoightly know what a's doing ataäkin' o'  
meä ?

I beant wonn as saws 'ere a beän an' yonder a pea ;  
An' Squoire ull be sa mad an' all—a' dear a' dear !  
An' I 'a managed for Squoire coom Michaelmas  
thutty year.'

That northern farmer is as thoroughly

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POEMS alive as any one could be, and his portrait has been painted without a superfluous stroke of the brush. His 'New Style' successor is equally finished, equally real, and his philosophy is undoubtedly practical :

'Luvv? what 's luvv? thou can luvv thy lass an' er  
munny too,  
Maakin' 'em grà togither as they 've good right to do.  
Couldn't I luvv thy muther by cause o' er munny  
laäid by?  
Naay—for I luvv'd 'er a vast sight moor fur it:  
reason why!'

The same type of work appears in all the Laureate's dialect poems — sketches of characters rough, homely, simple, sturdy, with narrow horizons and limited ideas, but exceedingly shrewd and genuine, and generally with a touch of tenderness which sweetens them very pleasantly. I incline to think that the nearest artistic parallel to them is to be found in Miss Wilkins's New England stories. One can fancy the 'Spinster's Sweet-'Arts' transformed into one of those tales without much difficulty.

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Of certain feminine types of a quite different class Tennyson has also given admirable portraits: rather the tender, clinging type of soft womanhood which is very charming and to some minds constitutes the true ideal; though with an occasional spice of wilfulness which is no doubt reprehensible but not without its own attraction — the character summed up in the Lilia of 'The Princess':

'A rose-bud set with little wilful thorns,  
And sweet as English air could make her, she.'

This type of damsels, with the variant, who is equally sweet, but perhaps a trifle irritating in her submissiveness— Lynette and Enid are about the most perfect specimens of the two — the Laureate has drawn many times with a tender and loving hand. We have all met such women outside of his poems, and in everyday life they make the world a much pleasanter and brighter place than it would be without them. Still, one has a suspicion that sweet-

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

DRAMATIC ness is hardly the be-all and end-all.

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There is room for a grander type, and Tennyson has not given it us.

For it is just when we come to the mightier passions that work in a strong nature that he fails us. It is strength that is wanting. The weaker natures, where they have a moral struggle and are victorious, vanquish not passions but emotions, something superficial that is not rooted in their being ; when they are carried away, it is by emotions. The lovers in 'Maud' and 'Locksley Hall' are carried away very much ; but you do not feel that it took very much to do it. It is a kind of atmospheric disturbance, very exciting while it lasts : but there is a certain want of grit about the sufferers. Speaking generally, there are many admirable representations of rather weak characters acted upon by vehement emotions ; but, except Lancelot and Guinevere, none of the stronger type ; and even those two are not of the strongest. Somehow, with them, as with Arthur, one feels that there is

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something defective in the portraiture : DRAMATIC POEMS  
the thing conveyed is not quite what was intended to be conveyed ; as if the poet himself had not fully grasped the character he wished to present.

For intensity of feeling, singleness of purpose, and indomitable resolution through fierce anguish are needed in making up a heroic figure. Even a great villain must have those qualities after a sort. And just this heroic note Tennyson never strikes quite clearly and firmly. Whether in the plays or the other pieces, the one character which really approaches this type is, to my mind, Queen Mary ; because, for all her distorted vision, her ideal is noble, and she never ceases to strive after it. Elsewhere, the accessories are beautiful ; the workmanship is consummate ; the figures themselves are fine ; but the sympathetic, imaginative grip of the characters is lacking.

The contrast between the Tennysonian *dramatis personæ*, with all the finished delicacy of their presentation,

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

DRAMATIC and the defiant vigour of Browning's  
<sup>POEMS</sup> portrait-gallery, is very striking. With these latter you are conscious at once that they are men and women who feel through and through with the whole concentrated strength of natures not easily stirred, but with immense capacities for feeling. 'The Italian in England' is a thoroughly simple and straightforward poem; not one of those elaborate expositions of a complex intellectual nature which so often, but by no means so invariably as is commonly supposed, attracted the poet. For the most part it moves quietly, calmly, steadily; without any piling up of adjectives, or rush of rhetorical and poetical expression, or vehemence of language. But the intensity of feeling is brought out all the more vividly by the one concentrated flash of deadly hatred that blazes out suddenly in the midst of the calm—half a dozen lines out of some hundred and thirty:

'How very long since I have thought  
Concerning—much less wished for—alright'

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Beside the good of Italy,  
For which I live and mean to die !  
I never was in love ; and since  
Charles proved false, what shall now convince  
My inmost heart I have a friend ?  
However, if I wished to spend  
Real wishes on myself—say, three—  
I know at least what one should be.  
*I would grasp Metternich until  
I felt his red wet throat distil  
In blood thro' these two hands.* And next,  
—Not much for that am I perplexed—  
Charles, perjured traitor, for his part,  
Should die slow of a broken heart  
Under his new employers. Last  
—Ah, there, what should I wish ? For fast  
Do I grow old and out of strength. . . .  
I think, then, I should wish to stand  
This evening in that dear, lost land,  
Over the sea the thousand miles,  
*And know if yet that woman smiles  
With the calm smile.'*

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You feel that the man has become a sort of embodiment of one single, utterly absorbing passion—the love of Italy ; all his loves and hates centre on that. He hates Metternich, not for hunting him 'from hill to plain, from shore to sea,' but because he is Italy's foe. He hates Charles, not for betraying him,

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POEMS but for deserting the cause. He loves the memory of the woman who helped him, because it was for Italy's sake the help was given ; that Italy 'for which I live and mean to die.' So he puts it, in the fewest and simplest words possible —but they are spoken from the bottom of his soul. It is not every one who can realise such concentration of feeling, or perhaps even recognise that the words mean much.

This stillness, which belongs only to feeling at white-heat, hardly attainable except through suffering of which natures either shallow or coarse are incapable, is a frequent note of Browning's characters. They have their outbursts too, but they have their periods of tremendous self-control. I need not refer to 'The Ring and the Book,' as that was dealt with at some length separately. But you find it all through the dramas — in 'Strafford,' 'Valence,' 'Luria'; in many of the shorter pieces —in the 'Lost Mistress' as well as 'The Patriot,' 'A Forgiveness,' or 'After.'

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' Ha, what avails Death to erase  
His offence, my disgrace?  
I would we were boys as of old  
In the field, by the fold.

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' His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn  
Were so easily borne!  
I stand here now, he lies in his place . . .  
Cover the face.'

It is a nature of the same kind that is drawn in 'Muléykeh'; Hóseyn, whose steed was stolen, and who in the act of capturing her again purposely spoke the words that taught the thief how to make her double her speed and escape. In the morning the neighbours found him weeping, and heard his story.

' And they jeered at him, one and all : " Poor Hóseyn  
is crazed past hope !

How else had he wrought himself his ruin, in  
fortune's spite ?

To have simply held his tongue were a task for  
a boy or a girl,

And here were Muléykeh again, the eyed like an  
antelope,

The child of his heart by day, the wife of his  
breast by night ! "

" And the beaten in speed !" wept Hóseyn :  
• " You never have loved my Pearl."'

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There is some truth in the proposition that Browning deals with abnormal characters ; but in the main that means really that they are normal characters intensified. The Italian in England is not a kind of person you expect to meet out at dinner, chiefly because people you meet out at dinner are not generally wholly absorbed in a single idea ; nor even perhaps, as a rule, capable of becoming so absorbed. Still, it would have been interesting to ascertain whether Mr. Bagehot would have classified that too as 'grotesque' art, when not engaged in defending a thesis.

That is an instance, however, of the abnormality being due to intensified feeling ; in a large number of cases the special interest lies in abnormal intellectual development. It is a pity that in selecting specimens of this class the editor of the shilling volume should have chosen Mr. Sludge, while ignoring Bishop Blougram, Fra Lippo Lippi, and Caliban. Not that these might not have had their places more satisfactorily filled

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up from among the other omissions, for DRAMATIC POEMS general purposes ; but for this special purpose these would have been more effective. Caliban in particular, because, with the other bishop, him of St. Praxed's, it is an extreme representative and at the same time conveniently short. Neither Caliban nor the bishop, if they were average samples, would be justified ; the point is that they are extreme cases, marking the possible limits. The bishop is drawn with a vigour which makes him actively repulsive instead of merely nasty, as he would have been in most people's hands, with the result that both artistically and ethically he is valuable instead of offensive. But nothing can possibly make either him or Caliban agreeable. The picture of that evil monster evolving out of his own inner consciousness an idea of the Creator as a Being just like himself on a large scale is exceedingly powerful, and exceedingly instructive.

Caliban speaks in the third person ;

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

DRAMATIC in the second section, in the first person.  
POEMS But he steadily omits the personal pronoun. Setebos is the Creator.

'Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos !  
'Thinketh, He dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon.  
'Thinketh, He made it, with the sun to match,  
But not the stars ; the stars came otherwise ;  
Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that ;  
Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,  
And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.  
'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease :  
He hated that He cannot change His cold,  
Nor cure its ache.

'Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,  
Nor kind, nor cruel : He is strong, and Lord.  
'Am strong myself, compared to yonder crabs  
That march now from the mountain to the sea :  
'Let twenty pass, and stoned the twenty-first,  
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.  
'Say the first straggler that boasts purple spots  
Shall join the file one pincer twisted off ;  
'Say, This bruised fellow shall receive a worm,  
And two worms he whose nippers end in red ;  
As it likes me, each time. I do : so He.'

It has been said that no one could have written 'Lear' and remained sane except the author of 'As You Like It.' One might say that no one could

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have created this Caliban and remained DRAMATIC  
human except the creator of Pompilia. POEMS

On the other hand, as an example of light and humorous characterisation, it would be hard to beat that 'Italian person of quality,' who distinguishes between the joys of life in the city square and the monotony of existence up at a villa ; with his

'Bang-whang-whang goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle  
the fife :

Oh, a day in the city square, there's no such  
pleasure in life.'

There are, however, later pieces, such as 'Fifine' and 'Prince Hohenstiel,' coming under the same category of semi-satirical dissection, which appear to me to be out of court altogether ; although the orthodox, as I am told, pin their faith to them, and say that if you really want to know what Browning thought, you must go to them. In that case, I for one don't want to know. I am content with what he has said elsewhere.

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Browning can draw commonplace, ordinary good folks, and knaves, and betwixt-and-between people, when he chooses: like the parents in 'The Ring and the Book'; the Saviles, Vanes, and Rudyards; Tresham; D'Ormea: there are plenty more, but they do not greatly interest him. What one does note especially is the immense range from the pure heights of Pompilia and Pope Innocent, the grandeur of Caponsacchi, Luria, and Strafford, the innocence of Pippa, down through types so different as Lippo, Andrea, Cleon; through Ogniben and Djabal, Berthold and Chiappino and Braccio, to the unspeakable depths of Guido, and finally Caliban: every one *alive*, complete, what they were meant to be. They may be noble, they may be hateful, but they are flesh and blood through and through. The vivid force and truth of the portraiture never fails. The man or woman depicted may be one with whom you are incapable of bringing yourself in sympathy—whom you can't

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understand ; but you may be tolerably DRAMATIC  
certain in the first place that the por-  
traiture is true, in the second that the  
subject is worth understanding, and in  
the third that if you cannot or will not  
understand, it may not be your own  
fault, but it most undoubtedly is your  
misfortune.

## VII

### THE POETS' LOVERS



HE test of a poet's true greatness, dramatically at any rate, is mainly to be found in his treatment of vital emotions ; those emotions, that is, by which the course of the individual life is most deeply affected ; most of all, the love of man and maiden, or man and wife.

Two of our poets, however, have not had overmuch to say on the subject. Neither Wordsworth nor Arnold had the dramatic gift, and neither of them chose to unlock the chambers of his own heart, unless Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poems are to be regarded as an instance

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to the contrary, or Arnold's 'Marguerite' series. Beautiful as the former are, they can scarcely be regarded as the expression of any very strong feeling ; and the kind of scholarly emotion after the best and most imperturbable models in the latter can scarcely be dignified with the name of love. Arnold's emotions, as exhibited in his writings, were schooled to a pitch of philosophic placidity which to less patient or reserved mortals is apt to prove irritating. And if 'Marguerite' is cold, 'Tristram and Iseult' is positively frosty. Wordsworth's nearest approach to a poem with love for its central interest is 'Laodamia' ; and there, admirable as is the teaching of the lines which give the keynote,

‘the gods approve  
The depth and not the tumult of the soul,’

the whole poem is characterised much more by gravity than intensity ; there is more head than heart in it.

But with Tennyson and Browning things are altogether different. With

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

THE POETS' <sup>LOVERS</sup> their wide and varied human sympathies, they have between them presented us with what one might almost call a museum of lovers of every possible type : lovers fickle, and lovers loyal; hopeful, despairing, triumphant, defeated, diffuse, concentrated, indignant, joyful ; lovers like Merlin, the victims of a strange and awful witchery ; like Guinevere, with her great repentance ; like Pompilia, with her stainless whiteness ; dramatic studies in which one supplements the other so that the whole field seems to be covered, Browning's greatest powers coming into play just where Tennyson's limitations bound him.

I have already observed that, while Tennyson's portrayal of certain dramatic types approaches perfection as nearly as may be, the range within which this holds good is not a very wide one. At the same time, its whole scope is within the sympathetic capacities, so to speak, of average folk : we do not feel it any effort to understand

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how people could feel like that, because THE POETS'  
we can imagine ourselves feeling like LOVERS  
that without any very great difficulty.

Applying this to love-songs and poems about lovers, it means that Tennyson is particularly successful in treating the idyllic and tender, or the superficial and vehement examples, which may be conveniently grouped together under the heading of 'sentimental.' I am not sure that the word is altogether a fair one, because it is apt to convey a suggestion of unreality, of theatrical claptrap, which is not intended. On the contrary, the emotions expressed are perfectly genuine, and carefully to be distinguished from the unwholesome sham excitement for the sake of effect of the herd of *poseurs* who selected Byron's worst characteristics to take model by. Tennyson's lovers do not indulge in tinsel heroics ; they do not profess sentiments which they do not feel, and metaphorically present pistols at their own heads with a cheerful consciousness that they are unloaded. Nor, on the other

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THE POETS' hand, are they the limp, consumptive  
LOVERS creatures of the era of 'Sensibility.' But words get so maltreated that classification which shall not be misleading is exceedingly difficult, and the word which I am driven to as covering the range of genuine passion outside the Tennysonian field requires at least equally careful guarding. That word is *Intense*. For, a few years ago, the slang usage of a clique gave such a hopelessly corrupt sense to it, that for a long time it could hardly be used without conveying a sense as nearly as possible the opposite of what it ought to be. Vigour, concentration, virile energy ought to be implied in it; it came to mean limp, futile, and gushing. It is sufficiently obvious that Browning, the most robust of writers and a born fighter, was not 'intense' in that preposterous use of the word; but intensity, in its proper sense, is the most marked characteristic of the emotions of his characters, as it is *not* of Tennyson's.

I have divided Tennyson's poems for

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the present purpose into two classes : THE POETS'  
the idyllic, and the vehement. Now, it  
is an essential note of the idyll that its  
atmosphere shall be peaceful ; and that  
prohibits the introduction of stormy  
emotions. But what is entirely and  
perfectly appropriate is that tender and  
thoroughly real feeling which we find in  
'The Gardener's Daughter' :

'So home I went, but could not sleep for joy,  
Reading her perfect features in the gloom,  
Kissing the rose she gave me o'er and o'er,  
And shaping faithful record of the glance  
That graced the giving--such a noise of life  
Swarmed in the golden present, such a voice  
Called to me from the years to come, and such  
A length of bright horizon rimmed the dark.'

Every word there rings true ; any  
suspicion of posing, of pretending to a  
feeling not really present, would jar  
on one at once and ruin the harmony.  
Tenderness, not force, is what is wanted  
and what we get ; the force may be  
latent, but is not expressed ; to ex-  
press it would be an artistic blunder,  
because it would be exciting instead of

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' <sup>LOVERS'</sup> soothing. There is no tragedy in the air ; no stern endurance, no tremendous sacrifice. There are peaceful idyllic lives in this world, and they are very pleasant and healthy to contemplate ; some of us are inclined to rate their value something too low, for one reason or another. Sometimes it is a hopelessly wrong reason, the craving for excitement for its own sake which is apt to develop into morbid and fantastic forms of intellectual dram-drinking ; but this is probably rare. Much oftener I take it to be the outcome of a genuine eagerness and vigour ; of an unrest which is the condition of all forward and upward movement, but fails to find sufficient outlet in placid sylvan surroundings. While we are thirsting for the fray, or in the thick of it, with tense nerves and bounding pulses, the picture of these peaceful scenes excites a certain indignant impatience. But at an earlier stage, and when in the pauses of the battle we have time to feel exhausted, we can realise that they have their own

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

delight, and that by no means a con- THE POETS'  
temptible one. The pipe has its uses LOVERS  
as well as the trumpet. We don't much want to play the part of Corin and Sylvia ourselves, but we are obliged to the poet for giving us a glimpse of them—and even now and then it is borne in upon us that Corin and Sylvia don't have such a very inefficient life of it after all.

But, indeed, these comments only apply to the point of view of a minority. All of us at times, most of us as a rule, find a readier pleasure in these tender sentiments than, perhaps, we are quite disposed to own. It is only when they become unreal and tricky that they become also unwholesome and twaddly ; and that these idyllic lovers of Tennyson's never are, seeing that they have in them all a characteristic which takes them out of the field of mere triviality, in the unfailing reverence of the man for the maiden—not spoken in so many words, but conveyed in every word.

Gareth is, perhaps, hardly a fully

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' developed lover in the story, but his attitude towards Lynette well illustrates my meaning—enshrined in King Arthur's memorable words concerning a 'maiden passion for a maid.' And something of the same is to be found in Geraint's speech to Yniol—the Geraint of the first part, of course ; not the amazingly contemptible Geraint the husband, of the second part, who has no claim to the sacred name of lover at all.

'To whom Geraint with eyes all bright replied,  
Leaning a little toward him, "Thy leave !  
Let me lay lance in rest, O noble host,  
For this dear child, because I never saw,  
Tho' having seen all beauties of our time,  
Nor can see elsewhere anything so fair.  
And if I fall, her name will yet remain  
Untarnished as before ; but if I live,  
So aid me Heaven when at mine uttermost,  
As I will make her truly my true wife."'

Whether Enid's love is entirely satisfactory is a question to which different people would doubtless give different answers. It is accompanied by a degree of self-suppression which is certainly not emulated by her spouse, and seems to

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

sum up the whole duty of woman as THE POETS' adoration *plus* obedience. Tennyson's LOVERS heroines are altogether lacking in that initiative which is so pre-eminently characteristic of Shakspeare's, who are quite as likely as not to be the guiding spirits in the partnerships. The conception is that which is commonly supposed to be favoured by the masculine mind, which lays a somewhat excessive stress on sweetness and pliability, and scarcely fits into that ideal of

'The reason firm, the temperate will,  
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;  
A perfect woman, nobly planned  
To warn, to comfort, and command,'

which Wordsworth describes, and a good deal more of which there would need to be about the maiden who should awaken in her lover that passion which King Arthur would have to make him 'worship her by years of noble deeds.'

Geraint himself serves a double capacity: first as the lover in an idyll, and secondly as a worse specimen of the same type as those in 'Maud' and

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' 'Locksley Hall,' who have the common  
LOVERS note, that they think about themselves  
a good deal too much. They are not  
absorbed in their love.

'Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all the  
chords with might ;  
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, passed in  
music out of sight.'

Yes ; but it would seem that the speaker is not accurately describing his own experience. He cannot forget what a very superior person he is ; and one has a dim suspicion that perhaps the shallow-hearted Amy had begun to think he was more interested in his own superiority than in hers before she decided

'to decline  
On a lower range of feeling, and a narrower heart  
than mine.'

In like manner, the hero of 'Maud' is too much possessed with his own wrongs to be absorbed in his love, or to keep his head for Maud's own sake under an insult. He is as vehement in his loathing for her brother as in his passion for

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

her; not a strong man absorbed by a THE POETS'  
LOVERS master passion, but a weak man tossed between passions of which now one, now another, gets the control over him. The real strong man we never seem to get. Still, it must be remembered that this poem is a study of a character who starts with a distempered brain, never very far from the borderland between sanity and madness.

But these hot-headed lovers with their gusts of feeling give us the daintiest of fancies in the daintiest of phrases, when the controlling feeling happens to be delight in the thought of the lady-love:

‘Birds in the high Hall-garden  
When twilight was falling,  
Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud,  
They were crying and calling.’

These of course are the rooks: just as in the next verse we evidently have thrushes, with the germ of ‘The Throstle’ in the third line:

‘Birds in our wood sang,  
Ringing through the valleys,  
Maud is here, here, here,  
• In among the lilies.

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

THE POETS'  
LOVERS

'I know the way she went  
Home with her maiden posy,  
For her feet have touched the meadows  
And left the daisies rosy.'

Surely as foolishly charming a fancy  
as ever poet conceived.

'There has fallen a splendid tear  
From the passion-flower at the gate.  
She is coming, my dove, my dear,  
She is coming, my life, my fate.  
The red rose cries, "She is near, she is near";  
And the white rose weeps, "She is late";  
The larkspur listens, "I hear, I hear";  
And the lily whispers, "I wait."'

If I have spoken with a certain depreciation, I cannot pass on from Tennyson without making some atonement by quoting one passage more in which he does effectually strike a note far above the wild vehemence or the tender grace of those poems to which I have referred as showing the normal limits of his effective range. If to us King Arthur is something of a phantom, it is no phantom that is

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

present to the mind of the repentant THE POETS'  
LOVERS Queen :

‘Gone—my Lord !  
Gone through my sin, to slay and to be slain !  
And he forgave me, and I could not speak.—  
I thought I could not breathe in that fine air,  
That pure severity of perfect light—  
I wanted warmth and colour, which I found  
In Lancelot—now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none  
Will tell the King I love him, tho' so late ?  
Now—ere he goes to the great Battle ? None :  
Myself must tell him in that purer life,  
But now it were too daring. Ah my God,  
What might I not have made of Thy fair world  
Had I but loved Thy highest creature here ?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest :  
It surely was my profit had I known :  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we see it,  
Not Lancelot, nor another.’

• I have not here to speak of that other kind of love wherof ‘In Memoriam’ gives us so beautiful a presentment. So it is noteworthy that, concerning love in its special sense, it is through a woman’s lips that the poet has uttered his noblest words: a woman whose

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' great sin was matched by her great  
LOVERS' repentance.

If love of one kind or another plays an important part in Tennyson's poems, its influence in Browning is assuredly not less vital. But it is not often marked by the grace and tenderness of the Laureate ; the fervour is too intense, the emotion too absorbing. Yet it is not altogether absent ; and indeed, it is rather curious that the most marked examples of it, apart from *Pompilia*, are perhaps to be found among the poet's last lyrics : 'Summum Bonum,' for instance, which one critic succeeded in discovering to be unreal and gushing :

' All the breath and the bloom of the year in the  
bag of one bee ;

All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the  
heart of one gem ;

In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine  
of the sea ;

Breath and bloom, wonder, wealth, shade and  
shine—and, how far above them,

Truth that's brighter than gem,

Trust that's purer than pearl ;

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe, all THE POETS'  
were for me LOVERS  
In the kiss of one girl.'

But indeed, if we come to consider, we find that these qualities are present in plenty of cases, only we forget them because of others more striking. In 'Evelyn Hope' the prominent conception is that of eternal endeavour; it is the potency, the vast reach of the speaker's love, that impress us; yet what could be more tender in thought or in expression than such lines as these?

'Till God's hand beckoned unawares,  
And the sweet white brow is all of her.—'

'So, hush; I will give you this leaf to keep;  
See, I shut it inside the sweet, cold hand.  
There: that is our secret—go to sleep;  
• You will wake, and remember, and understand.'

Perhaps it is in those poems where, as it seems, love has 'failed of its purpose here,' that Browning's most characteristic work, and the work by which he has won most positive gratitude, was

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' done: inasmuch as they are instinct  
**LOVERS** with the belief that failure here is not  
failure for good and all; that God  
'creates the love to reward the love.'  
There is no difficulty in understanding  
the position in such cases as Evelyn  
Hope or Prospice, where the love on  
earth is disappointed by death. But  
the problems suggested both by 'Any  
Wife to any Husband,' and 'The Last  
Ride Together,' are very much more  
complex. I do not propose to enter  
upon them; to do so would make it  
necessary to trench on theological and  
metaphysical matters, which are outside  
the scope of this volume. And apart  
from that, it may reasonably be ques-  
tioned whether the logical attitude of a  
lover is a profitable subject of investiga-  
tion. People will fall in love, and, being  
in, will behave themselves with a com-  
plete disregard for logical propriety,  
which all the sages may succeed in  
affecting at much about the same date  
as they may hope to discover the philo-  
sopher's stone.

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

We shall not, therefore, inquire what THE POETS' A, if a logical person, would think LOVERS about his correct relation to B in the case where A loves B and B entirely declines to return his affections. But we shall observe that the pain which the lover in Browning's poems suffers is something ennobling and purifying. I suppose that if one wished to name two poems in the language which present a really complete contrast, 'Locksley Hall' and 'The Lost Mistress' would be about as effective a pair as could be found. The one poem is gorgeous with magnificent accessories, splendid with music, voluble, tempestuous ; the other perfectly simple, direct, unadorned. But the one lover has been hurt mainly in his self-respect ; the other is heart-stricken. Time and pluck *may* heal such a wound ; but there is no comparison between the pain of it and the pain of the other. And when Browning's poem is coupled with 'The Last Ride Together,' the spirit which animates the speakers is revealed in its steadfast nobility.

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS'  
LOVERS

'I said, "Then, Dearest, since 'tis so ;  
Since now at length my fate I know ;  
Since nothing all my love avails ;  
Since all my life seemed meant for fails—  
Since this was written, and needs must be—  
*My whole heart rises up to bless  
Your name in pride and thankful'ness.*"'

In proportion to the seriousness of true love as Browning understood it is his scorn for the merely superficial or sensuous emotions which pass in common parlance under the same title ; it is a degradation of the word that Caponsacchi and the Venetians of Galuppi's 'Toccata' should be alike classified as lovers.

'The soul doubtless is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.'

'As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,  
Here on earth they bore their fruitage : mirth and folly were the crop.  
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop ?'

For love, as he conceives it, is something that thrills every fibre of our being ;

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

no transitory emotion that comes and THE POETS'  
goes like the breeze, casually awakened LOVERS  
and casually quenched. Such emotions  
there are, the marks of human weak-  
ness and deficiency, the outcome either  
of undeveloped or effete humanity ;  
emotions which we may take for love,  
through ignorance :

'This was a heart the Queen leant on, thrilled in a  
moment erratic,'

as he sings in 'Misconceptions' ; but  
love they are not.

For the love which is indeed worthy  
of the name is something altogether  
different, having its source in whatever  
is noblest of our nature. 'Nearer we  
hold of God who gives, than of His  
tribes that take, I must believe' ; and  
in virtue of that fact, the love of man  
and wife is an attribute of humanity. It  
is an aspect of religion, enabling us to  
understand the meaning of the Divine,  
being itself the most Divine possession  
we have. In 'By the Fireside,' where  
the husband, in 'an age so blest that by

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

THE POETS' its side youth seemed the waste instead,'  
LOVERS meditates on that past when 'the bar  
was broken between life and life,' he  
gives expression to the thought :

'Think, when our one soul understands  
The great word which makes all things new,  
When Earth breaks up and Heaven expands,  
How will the change strike me and you  
In the house not made with hands?

'Oh, I must feel your brain prompt mine,  
Your heart anticipate my heart ;  
You must be just before, in fine,  
See and make me see, for your part,  
New depths of the Divine.'

This is the love which lifts the lover, not into a fictitious paradise which vanishes at the first brush of adversity, but into an atmosphere of strength and life : a light which illumines the soul with a glory growing always fuller. Through the mouths of his many men and women, Browning set forth these conceptions ; of his own love he has spoken in the Invocation in 'The Ring and the Book,' and 'once and only once, and for One only' in 'One Word

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

More.' With lines written by that One THE POETS'  
LOVERS

we may fitly conclude.

They are from the 'Portuguese Sonnets,' a series which assuredly ranks among the most perfect love-poems in the language, as they are incomparably their author's finest work :

'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being, and ideal grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.'

## VIII

### RETROSPECTION

'Break, break, break,  
At the foot of thy crags, O sea !  
But the tender grace of a day that is dead  
Can never come back to me.'



WONDER if there is any time in our lives when those words fail entirely to appeal to us : save in those moments—rare moments—of supreme happiness when the past and the future are forgotten in a present that seems an eternity of bliss ? In childhood, I suppose, when the infinite possibilities of being 'grown up' are so impressive, we did not think much about the past ; but

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

as the cares of life thicken round us,  
there is generally a kind of fictitious  
glow about the halcyon days before this  
or that particular trouble began to vex  
our souls.

RETRO-  
SPECTION

Is it that

'The past will always win  
A glory from its being far;  
And orb into the perfect star  
We saw not when we walked therein'?

The very griefs we suffered in the days that are no more are invested with a tender halo—*haec olim meminisse juvabit*: 'some day we shall enjoy the memory of these things,' said the storm-tossed Æneas. There are plenty of men who honestly believe that their school-days were the happiest time of their lives, though the school-boy to whom they make the airy and time-honoured statement for the most part puts it down as 'rot.' He refuses to believe that his predecessors who sat on the same hard benches, and carved their unseemly initials on the same desk, had the positive preference for frequent

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

canings which their words seem to imply. His own impression is that he found life much jollier when he was controlled only by a governess sufficiently anxious for her own peace of mind to be disinclined to challenge contests which might be avoided. Still, I am bound to say that if you described that reminiscence to the young gentleman as 'the tender grace of a day that is dead,' he would probably repeat the above vulgar but expressive monosyllable, with increased energy.

But school-boys, as is well known, share Hotspur's views on poetry, save such as is of a martial order. If you quote to them

'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair,  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes  
In looking on the happy autumn fields,  
And thinking on the days that are no more,'

they will regard you with a scornful pity. I will not be responsible for the views of the average school-girl on the subject, but I should rather expect her

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

to say, 'How lovely!' and then depart to read 'King Solomon's Mines' privily. I don't believe she dwells upon the days that are no more, as a rule; at least, in the sense of the song. Still, I was recently informed by a lady who ought to know, that there never was a time in her own life when she didn't regret that the last section of it had come to an end. Coming to the end of anything is rather melancholy.

RETRO-  
SPECTION

But even when the actual school-days are over, it may be doubted whether the poetry of retrospection finds very much favour with young and healthy minds. Time was when it was the correct thing to be occupied in fading away, and the tear of sensibility was ever ready to flow. Brooding over the past was quite *en règle*; and if you hadn't a past to brood over, you could manufacture one, which did very nearly as well. The fashion has changed, and, with the development of outdoor life and physical exercise, activity is the order of the day. There is so much to

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

do, and a mere indulgence in the luxury of woe—especially imaginary woe—is waste of time. Besides which, when you are still young enough to be hurt at being considered young, the future—unless in exceptional cases—is really ever so much more interesting than the past.

All the same, there are times when the past comes back upon our minds with an irresistible attraction ; even for those who are most persistently engaged on thoughts of the future. When the maiden sang ‘Tears, idle tears’ in ‘The Princess,’ Ida commented on the song, very much as young and impatient enthusiasts generally will :

‘If, indeed, there haunt  
About the moulder’d lodges of the Past  
So sweet a voice and vague, fatal to men,  
Well needs it we should cram our ears with wool  
And so pass by : but thine are fancies hatch’d  
In silken-folded idleness ; nor is it  
Wiser to weep a true occasion lost,  
But trim our sails, and let old bygones be.’

Nevertheless, it was no such long

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

time before there was a very different scene, when

RETRO-  
SPECTION

'Her voice  
Choked, and her forehead sank upon her hands,  
And her great heart thro' all the faultful Past  
Went sorrowing in a pause I dared not break.'

That mood, however, was not very long-lived. It is not much use crying over spilt milk, though it is not much use, either, to try and persuade ourselves that the milk was never spilt at all. The temples of the future are built out of the ruins of the past, and we may lament the vanished glories without harm if we are steadily resolved to match them in the days to come; more than that, the memory of what has been will often help to enrich our conception of what may be, of what it lies with us to do for our own generation and the generations that are to follow. But the doing of that is the main thing, after all.

'There has passed away a glory from the earth.' It was in no mood of emasculate lamentation that Words-

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

worth wrote the ode on the 'Intimations of Immortality.' A certain regret there is for 'the glory and the dream' (which many people are in the habit of declaring to be altogether fictitious, or contrary to common experience). But regret is not the dominant feeling ; rather it is an almost triumphant expectation.

While I am on the subject of the Ode, I should like to indulge in a brief digression on a point in regard to which Wordsworth has been subjected to severe criticism—by Mr. John Morley amongst others. The critics positively deny the 'glory and the dream' theory. They say that as a matter of fact we enjoy Nature in after years much more than we did in childhood ; and that the poet in looking back invested the past with delights which had never existed. On the other hand, Mr. Ruskin has affirmed the essential truth of Wordsworth's view. My own belief is that Wordsworth and Mr. Ruskin are right not

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

only as concerns themselves, but also as concerns a very large number of us—though not, perhaps, the majority. A child will often find a vivid delight in a bit of rich colouring, especially colouring which has much light in it, like certain gems; water, mountains, and sky will affect him intensely. He has not learnt to analyse the feeling; he cannot tell you what it is that sets him

RETRO-  
SPECTION

'Singin' out for the happy he feels inside,'

as the author of 'Fo'c'sle Yarns' has it; and his delight will anyhow be less critical—much more crude in its source as well as in its expression—than in after days. Our satisfaction in a noble landscape is more educated, more definite, as time goes on, no doubt; but the question is whether it is really keener, whether the beauty of the external world really acts upon us more. Of course, when Mr. Morley says the view opposed to his own is 'contrary to notorious fact, experience, and truth,' there is not much

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

room left for argument. When so sober a critic is so positive, one feels that to question his assertion requires courage. But it appears to me that, as a matter of authority, Wordsworth and Mr. Ruskin know as much about it as their critic; and as a matter of experience, many children *are* alive to the 'glory and the dream,' who cease to be so in after years. The power of analysing the glory, the child lacks and the man often gains; the power of feeling it, the child often has and the man loses.

But that is not the important point here. What the poet emphatically ~~felt~~ was, that the 'tender grace of a day that is dead' is not the source of a weak-kneed despair, but an earnest of splendour to come. And that is a position which you cannot weaken by saying that life is fuller now than it was before. You may be too much occupied with the future to think of the past—that is the natural tendency of young and vigorous souls into which the iron has not yet entered. You may

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

take to exaggerating the goodness of the past and refusing to believe that the future can hold in store anything worth having—in which case you are not likely to be much of a comfort to yourself or anybody else, and retrospection becomes an unmixed evil. That is an attitude which deserves sympathy only when it is the outcome of exceptionally bitter experiences. But it is not the attitude of Wordsworth or any other of our poets. As a passing mood it finds in them frequent expression ; but a passing mood is another matter from a constant mental attitude.

RETRO-SPECTION

None of these writers takes so consistently forward a view of life as Browning. Now and then, however, he too looks back on the past ; notably in 'By the Fireside' and in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra.' But it is not a *dead* past that he looks on in them, but a past which contained the germ of the present, and of a nobler development to come.

'Come back with me to the first of all,  
Let us lean and love it over again'—

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO- yes ; but  
SPECTION

' If I traced

This path back, is it not in pride  
To think how little I dreamed it led  
To an age so blest that by its side  
Youth seems the waste instead ?'

And so in ' Rabbi Ben Ezra,' under  
the metaphor of the Cup and the  
Potter's Wheel :

' What though the earlier grooves  
Which ran the laughing loves  
Around thy base, no longer pause and press ?  
What though, about thy rim,  
Scull-things in order grim  
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress ?  
Look not thou down, but up ! '

Of course, there are poems which  
take a very different line, when his  
*dramatis personæ* go back to the past  
in various moods of a temporary char-  
acter ; the passionate grief of ' May  
and Death ' :

' I wish that when you died last May,  
Charles, there had died along with you  
Three parts of spring's delightful things ;  
Ay, and, for me, the fourth part, too ' ; .

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

the bitter disappointment of wasted lives, in 'Dis Aliter Visum' or 'Youth and Art'; the frenzy of 'The Confessional,' and the semi-madness of 'Confessions.' But these are dramatic, and can never be felt as anything but dramatic; expressions of an accidental mood in the life of this or that individual. For the most part, Browning lets the past alone; at any rate, he does not allow its haunting echoes to take the place of the harmonies that the future holds in store. And when he does go back to it, it is less for its own sake than because the promise it contained has been fulfilled.

RETRO-SPECTION

Neither Wordsworth nor Mrs. Browning are much given to musings on the past, but not a few critics are of opinion that the Laureate's best title to fame rests precisely on his achievement in this field: and in this field also Matthew Arnold is undoubtedly at his best. 'Thyrsis' and 'Rugby Chapel' and the 'Memorial Lines' will live, though

## SEERS AND SINGERS

**RETRO-  
SPECTION** 'Sohrab and Rustum' and 'Merope'  
be forgotten. The sob of

'Break, break, break,  
On thy cold grey stones, O sea,'

the sighing of 'Tears, idle tears,' the tender cadences and the proud restraint of 'In Memoriam,' will linger in the ears of men and in the hearts of the sorrow-laden, though Arthur and his knights should melt away and vanish like the towers and pinnacles of Camelot.

As to the beauty of those two songs, 'wild with all regret' as they are, the most impatient critic can have no evil to say, save that they are deceptive and fatal siren-songs, the more demoralising for their alluring charm. And that is a criticism which time will assuredly cause the critic to swallow, with apologies, and with gratitude to the poet for having given such perfect expression to feelings that sooner or later, though it may be for a short time only, we all must own to. And at such times it is better to let the tears flow.

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

Tennyson has his bits of dramatic retrospection, too. The hero of 'Locksley Hall' moralises, sixty years after, very much as one would have expected. As the young man had a general opinion that he and his contemporaries held the key of all progress, so the old one thinks that progress became a headlong rush downhill when he ceased to take—or fancy he was taking—an active part in it. The octogenarian prophet of pessimism has usually started life as a revolutionary. We are so prone to generalise from our personal disappointments! The spinster with her Tommies is a very different kind of person, whose mind dwells on casual events, which she reverts to with a humorous enjoyment and without regret. Laurence Aylmer's reminiscences have their tinge of sadness, such as is awakened in every one who looks upon the scenes from which the old familiar faces have gone for ever; but there are more smiles than tears in the poem. The hero of 'The Gardener's Daughter'

RETRO-  
SPECTION

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

is capable of making the assertion that 'those old Mays had thrice the life of these'—a conviction which most folks attain to some time or other, only we date the 'old Mays' differently. These are all individual moods, however. The mood of the songs is universal, inasmuch as it comes upon all men, and not once only in a lifetime to most.

One sometimes wonders, in reading Matthew Arnold's poems, whether he ever was really young at all—young and foolish. Everything he wrote bears such an impress of trained gravity. He is more like Laurence Aylmer than anything else in Tennyson. In his elegiac poems, as in those which are more or less dramatic, there is no note of passion, no wildness of regret. Once or twice, as in the poem called 'Growing Old,' there is a bitter taste of dust and ashes ; but usually, when he turns to the past, it is to dwell with serene melancholy on the disillusionment that years have brought—to contrast the bright dreams of yore with the fading

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hopes of to-day. When he retraces the paths on which he had rambled with 'Thyrsis,' the change that most impresses him is that now

RETRO-SPECTION

'Long the way appears which seemed so short  
To the less practised eye of sanguine youth ;  
And high the mountain-tops, in cloudy air,  
The mountain-tops where is the throne of Truth,  
Tops in life's morning-sun so bright and bare !  
Unbreachable the fort  
Of the long-battered world uplifts its wall ;  
And strange and vain the earthly turmoil grows,  
And near and real the charm of thy repose,  
And night as welcome as a friend would fall.'

Now, the young man or maiden who is prepared to echo the sentiment of those lines, as a matter of his or her own personal experience, must be either out of sorts, or the victim of some kind of intellectual malady. When

'round us too the night  
In ever-nearing circle weaves her shade,'

it is another matter. When we have been through the brunt of the battle, it is legitimate to say we are tired. But when we have got the brunt of the

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

battle in front of us, it is unwise to remind ourselves too often that it's going to be a very fatiguing affair. It is better to risk disappointment at the end than to be disheartened at the outset. If, to escape the pain of disillusion, we steadily decline the joy of anticipation, we are no very great gainers. Hope to-day is not merely the source of bitterness to-morrow. There are some folks who reach their fourscore years without being disillusioned at all. There are different ways of taking experience. You may

'Welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,'

though it is an uncommonly difficult thing to do. Or you may take the rebuff with a shrug, and say it was only what you ought to have expected. Or you may cry out against fate for having raised your hopes only to dash them, regarding your woes as a specially designed insult to your important personality, like Marie Bashkirtseff. But

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there is no doubt which course of the  
three is the noblest—and the hardest.

RETRO-  
SPECTION

It would seem that it is precisely this absence of passion, this austere serenity, which constitutes the fascination exercised over certain minds by Arnold's poems, coupled with their scholarly manner and purity of expression. One reason, perhaps, why this is the case may be found in the very opposite character of so much of the contemporary poetry which found admirers—never perhaps very numerous, but vehemently enthusiastic; poetry which was emotional and glowing, whatever its faults were, to a somewhat fatiguing degree. One can imagine people turning from that overheated, scent-laden atmosphere, with a sense of relief, to this clear, still air; finding their sense of form, their *literary* desires, satisfied without being called upon to feel any exciting emotions, their consciousness of the inefficiency of mortal things confirmed without bitterness and with a calm, which is very nearly cheerful.

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

But it is the sort of thing which must appeal mainly to people who are *tired*, whether from the exhaustion of some struggle brief but fierce, or from the weariness of long endurance, or from a certain moral lassitude. To admire, even to sympathise with it, is one thing ; to turn to it habitually for consolation is another. It makes looking forward the reverse of attractive, whereas it is best for us to go on looking forward until the play is played out. This attitude is all very well if we have found life bitter ; to assume it, perhaps, gives us a certain sense of superiority to illusion if as a matter of fact we have found life sweet, but it will not help us much towards making it sweeter.

Therefore I find in 'Rugby Chapel' a higher note than in 'Thyrsis,' despite the superiority of poetical form in the latter poem, or in 'Empedocles,' though there the dramatic fitness of the thoughts justifies them. It is one thing to take joy in thoughts for their own sake, and another to find satisfaction in seeing

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what a particular person will think under given circumstances. In 'Rugby Chapel,' however, the memory of a heroic spirit triumphs over egoistic melancholy, and for once we have a poem in which hope predominates—hope derived from the thought of those

RETRO-  
SPECTION

'Souls tempered with fire,  
Fervent, heroic, and good,  
Helpers and friends of mankind' ;

who

'Move through the ranks, recall  
The stragglers, refresh the outworn,  
Praise, re-inspire the brave !  
Order, courage, return,  
Eyes rekindling, and prayers  
Follow your steps as ye go.  
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,  
Strengthen the wavering line,  
Establish, continue our march,  
On, to the bound of the waste,  
On, to the city of God.'

The son may help us to put up with life, but the father helped men to *make* it.

The Laureate's greatest work—if one may speak as if the relative merits of

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

RETRO-  
SPECTION

his greater works can be yet decided —is altogether different in tone. For the key to it is distinctly the loss of an individual friend ; whereas, in 'Thyrsis,' Arnold's 'In Memoriam A. H. Clough,' the loss of the individual friend is very much less prominent than the general idea of change. With Tennyson the one face that he loved most is gone for ever, and every thought turns on that. Change for itself is the thing that the Oxford poet mourns, and loss of a friend as part of the change. It is in the hour of overwhelming grief that 'In Memoriam' appeals to us most of all ; 'Thyrsis' is rather the expression of a general weariness to which a particular occasion has given voice. If I should attempt to pick out the verses on which the whole argument of 'In Memoriam' hangs, they would be these :

### VI

'O, what to her shall be the end ?  
And what to me remains of good ?  
To her, perpetual maidenhood,  
And unto me no second friend.'

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XXVII

'I hold it true, whate'er befall ;  
I feel it when I sorrow most ;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.'

RETRO-  
SPECTION

LIV

'Behold, we know not anything ;  
I can but trust that good shall fall  
At last—far-off—at last, to all,  
And every winter change to spring.'

It is not, therefore, a poem expressing the feeling aroused by contemplation of the past generally, but of the past as associated with one particular person, ~~never~~ again to be seen on this side of the gates of death ; the cry of bereavement, not of disappointment ; the voice of weakness, but of one crying for the light, and trusting that the light will come.

To one who has never known such a loss it will be easy to agree with the critic, and say :

'This fellow would make weakness weak,  
And melt the waxen hearts of men.'

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**RETRO-SPECTION** To whom the answer is given very sufficiently :

'Behold, ye speak an idle thing :  
Ye never knew the sacred dust.'

Another, to whom the poet's faith, sustaining him through his grief, is a vain thing, may speak impatiently, saying that such consolation is as a house built upon the sand—empty and deceptive as a bubble ; that it is better to face the worst and harden your heart. And indeed, if the poet's faith be vain, that would seem to be about the best thing to be done ; only, it would have been as well to begin hardening your heart beforehand.

But to one to whom comes such and so great a loss—a loss which for the time empties the world of light—to whom the faith has been given, but for whom, at the time, it seems to be swallowed up in the darkness—to such a one the knowledge that another has borne the like grief, has given it such expression, and has held fast to the

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

faith through it, is a source of unspeakable consolation. When as yet the pain is too recent and too keen for him to hail it as a message from Heaven, to welcome it as the 'sting that bids not sit nor stand, but go,' he will find comfort in the words that utter his own sorrow, a voice for his unspoken cry for help in that invocation :

RETRO-  
SPECTION

'Strong Son of God, Immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen Thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove ;

'Thou wilt not leave us in the dust :  
Thou madest man, he knows not why ;  
He thinks he was not made to die ;  
And Thou hast made him : Thou art just.'

The moods of sorrow are many and various. Part at least of the fascination of 'In Memoriam' lies in the range of moods which it covers, so that one can hardly fail to find the moment's feeling expressed somewhere or other in the poem—the inarticulate grief made articulate with a strange perfection that

## SEERS AND SINGERS

**RETRO  
SPECIION** brings with it a wonderful relief. 'I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me.' It is the poet's gift to men to have uttered what they could only feel before.

## IX

### IDEAS AND IDEALS



STARTED out with the intention of talking about five poets, and about one of the five hardly a word has been said. Because, in many ways, Mrs. Browning stands curiously apart from the rest ; it is harder to find common ground for the purposes of comparison. The reason of this appears to me to be, that she deals more in abstract ideas ; that her thoughts are rarely self-centred, as is so much the case with Arnold, and with much of Wordsworth and some of Tennyson ; and her sympathies are less for individuals than for classes. The Portuguese Sonnets, one of which was

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

IDEAS AND IDEALS quoted in a previous chapter, are a marked exception to this general statement; but it accounts for the absence from her work of anything of high dramatic quality on the one hand, and of egoistic meditation on the other. For her poetry shows both the susceptibility to strong feeling on her own part, and the ready sympathy, the power of understanding other people, which might have been expected to result in outbursts of lyrical passion or dramatic characterisation.

Lyrical passion of a sort we have from her :

' Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,  
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?  
They are leaning their young heads against their  
mothers,  
And *that* cannot stop their tears.  
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,  
The young birds are chirping in the nest,  
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,  
The young flowers are blowing towards the west :  
But the young young children, O my brothers,  
They are weeping bitterly !  
They are weeping in the play-time of the others,  
In the country of the free.'

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

There is a cry of passionate pity IDEAS AND running all through 'The Cry of the IDEALS Children'; but if Tennyson had desired to stir the sympathies which are aroused by it, he would have set to work with a poem after the manner of the 'Children's Hospital,' and similarly Browning would have made the interest centre on the sufferings of some individual child. The voice, so to speak, would have come not from the poet but from the child. Not the poet, but one of the children, would have interpreted the cry of the rest; the method would have been dramatic. One may say that with Robert Browning the method is always dramatic even when the form is lyrical; even if there is an abstract idea to be dealt with, it is done by 'Lippo, Roland, or Andrea,' and the treatment of it is full of the personality of the imagined speaker. On the other hand, 'The Cry of the Children' is not an expression of the poet's own personal mood, as 'In Memoriam' is, or Wordsworth's Ode, or 'Thyrsis.' So that the

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

IDEAS AND IDEALS point of the distinction is, that whereas what I must lamely call the Lyrical as opposed to the Dramatic method is used by the other poets for the expression of a personal mood, and is almost confined to that, Mrs. Browning uses it *instead* of the Dramatic method ; while, like her husband, she rarely expresses her personal mood at all.

The habit of mind which has led to this result seems to come out also when she does intend to be dramatic. Her speakers do not really retain their individuality, but become mouthpieces for the declamation of some generalisation ; some broad observations which go altogether outside the immediate range of the individual's interest. Imagine any one talking at large after the manner of the lover in 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship'! No man would ever have dreamed of saying all that. The poet proclaims the ideas which the situation suggests to her. She forgets the individual feeling of the moment, and generalises, just when generalising is dramatically

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

absurd. Now, he of 'Locksley Hall,'<sup>IDEAS AND IDEALS</sup> concerning whom I have said sundry hard things, talks a good deal of nonsense and proves himself rather a poor creature; but his generalising is dramatically right. Whereas Lady Geraldine's lover makes exactly the sort of speech that he might have composed for himself a week later as the proper thing for him to have said under the circumstances; but it is just what he never would have said at the time. Mrs. Browning's sense of dramatic fitness is overturned by her pursuit of abstract ideas. The ideas may be fine, But they are out of place just where they come.

Hence her finest effects are produced when she is not attempting to be dramatic, but is interpreting some comparatively abstract conception: the feeling of a whole class, as in 'The Cry of the Children'; the idea of liberty, as in 'Casa Guidi'; the idea of patriotism, as in 'The Forced Recruit'—a Venetian forced to serve in the Austrian

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IDEAS AND ranks against his countrymen at Solferino:

- ‘By your enemy tortured and goaded  
To march with them, stand in their file,  
His musket (see) never was loaded,  
He facing your guns with that smile.
- ‘As orphans yearn on to their mothers  
He yearned to your patriot bands :—  
“ Let me die for our Italy, brothers,  
If not in your ranks, by your hands.” . . .
- ‘Twas sublime. In a cruel restriction  
Cut off from the guerdon of sons,  
With most filial obedience, conviction,  
His soul kissed the lips of her guns.
- ‘That moves you ? Nay, grudge not to show it,  
While digging a grave for him here ;  
The others who died, says your poet,  
Have glory :—let *him* have a tear.’

In her right perception of what is base, in her ready response to what is noble, in her tender sympathy for suffering, in her high conception of the ideals at which a pure nature must aim, Mrs. Browning was a true poet, and a true woman. Her artistic capacity fell very far short of her poetic feeling, and the defectiveness of her versification, as well as the other demerits of her man-

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

ner of composition (as in the dramatic pieces criticised above), makes her work much less effective and convincing than it deserved to be ; always with the exception of the Portuguese Sonnets, which stand alone as the genuine outpouring of her own heart. Apart from these (and from 'Aurora Leigh,' which is not included for the purpose of this volume), it is in the 'Vision of Poets' that the highest qualities of the poet, the best gift she has given us, are to be found. There at least we find that courageous acceptance of pain, that assurance of holiness, that triumph through suffering, which make men into martyrs and heroes ; and to make men ready to be martyrs and heroes would seem to be among the highest functions of the poets. The lines which follow are in form characteristic of the writer ; their spirit is closely akin to much in the noblest poems of her husband :

' I-laid my soul before thy feet  
That images of fair and sweet  
Might walk to other men on it.

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### IDEAS AND IDEALS

'I am content to feel the step  
Of each pure image : let those keep  
To Mandragore, who care to sleep.'

'I am content to touch the brink  
Of the other goblet, and I think  
My bitter drink a wholesome drink.'

'*I knew*—is all the mourner saith,  
Knowledge by suffering entereth,  
And Life is perfected by Death.'

Heroism and martyrdom are not as a rule suggested by Matthew Arnold, but rather that calm and unemotional attitude towards what we have got to put up with which is perhaps as good an antidote as may be found for the hysterical raptures and equally hysterical despair that sometimes play havoc with reason and feeling. Nevertheless, when he betakes himself to barbaric realms, although Thor and Rustum would hardly know themselves in their polished and stately half-Hellenised portraits, the poet is in sufficient sympathy with his subject to give a sense of emotion controlled, instead of emotion educated away altogether.

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In 'Balder' there is an element altogether wanting in Arnold's latter-day meditations: a something which is in curious contrast with his usually very academic habit of mind. The grim old Norse world, with its gods and heroes loving and hating, feasting and fighting, fearing nothing, dauntless and stubborn, with Ragnarok, 'the Twilight of the Gods,' to end it all for most of them; and in the midst of the turbulent, bloodstained crowd, the strange pure figure of Balder the Beautiful, the Beloved, the Reconciler, captive among the strengthless dead, one day to reappear spreading peace amid new heavens and a new earth—I find this infinitely more stirring, more instinct with life. For the idea is heroic. Perhaps the reeds did have a better time of it than the oak when the storm came; but one's sympathies are with the oak, for all that. The conception is grim enough; barbaric if you will; but at any rate not effete. If we have not the higher inspiration of the confidence

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IDEALS

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IDEAS AND IDEALS that the struggle is after all but purification, we have at least the stern triumph of fighting it out, and falling with all our wounds in front.

Moreover, in this poem Arnold has touched, strangely enough, a note of tenderness which is wanting in him as a rule; whether from sheer force of contrast between Balder and his fellow-gods, or just because in that barbaric atmosphere the poet was for once constrained to loose the bonds in which for the most part he kept his emotions fettered. The nearest thing to tears in his poems is to be found in the speech of Hoder—the blind Hoder who all unwitting had dealt the fatal blow whereby the halls of Heaven had been rest of that gracious presence—when he meets Hermod on the outer bounds of the realms of gloom:

‘For this I died, and fled beneath the gloom,  
Not daily to endure abhorring gods,  
Nor with a hateful presence cumber Heaven :  
And canst thou not, even here, pass pitying by ?  
No less than Balder have I lost the light

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Of Heaven and communion with my kin ; IDEAS AND  
I, too, had once a wife, and once a child, IDEALS  
And substance, and a golden house in Heaven—  
But all I left of my own act, and fled  
Below, and dost thou hate me even here ?  
Balder upbraids me not, nor hates at all,  
Though he has cause, have any cause ; but he,  
When that with downcast looks I hither came,  
Stretched forth his hand, and with benignant voice,  
*Welcome, he said, if there be welcome here,*  
*Brother, and fellow-sport of Lok with me.'*

The man who does the best service to mankind is he who, whatever his particular function may be, most helps us to live nobler lives. The ideal of suppressed emotion, of a calm above perturbation by the ordinary freaks of fate, which in general Matthew Arnold seems to me to set before us, is a fine one in its way ; but it is fatalistic. If we have just to take what fortune sends us, and bear it as best we may, this attitude would seem to be about the best to strive after ; at least it is far better than wasting our time on vain complaints against the cruelty of Fortune which is not only blind but deaf. But something

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IDEAS AND more is wanted if we are to be roused IDEALS to activity instead of mere passivity. If we are to take our own share in making our own lot—more, if we can take a part in the making of our neighbour's lot for weal or woe—we want something beyond the capacity for sitting still with folded hands and observing 'Kismet,' while our neighbours right and left are being shot down and we are ourselves receiving an occasional wound. We want to be roused to go and stop the shooting ; we want to believe that it is worth while to try. Now, that is just the effect which the cry of self-commiseration which sundry minor poets have loved to raise—and for the matter of that will go on raising—does not produce. It makes us feel that we have quite as good a right as they to call upon gods and men to pity us. The cry of *sympathetic* pity is another matter, and rouses the chivalrous instincts in him who hears it. There is no whining about Matthew Arnold, but there is not much sympathy either.

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The effect of most great poetry is to stir the emotions, and to give them a worthy object ; the effect of Arnold is to calm them, if not to suppress them.

Wordsworth holds an altogether exceptional place as an influence, for he generally lets the fighting emotions at any rate alone. When we read him the stress of the struggle passes away from our minds ; a great peace is over all things, and yet not the peace of the Lotus Eaters, which is a weariness. This is a healing and refreshing calm.

'But where will Europe's later hour  
Again find Wordsworth's healing power ?  
Others will teach us how to dare,  
And against fear our breast to steel :  
Others will strengthen us to bear—  
But who, ah ! who will make us feel ?  
The cloud of mortal destiny,  
Others will front it fearlessly—  
But who, like him, will put it by ?'

Perhaps it is really because he restores our mental and moral balance by

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**IDEAS AND IDEALS** getting things into their right proportion. When you get into a hill-country, in the valleys the low hills obscure the great peaks. In the rough-and-tumble of everyday life, the little things affect us to the forgetting of the larger things. Wordsworth takes you up among the tops, where things recover their right level; not because he makes you despise the little things—it is he who speaks of

‘That best portion of a good man’s life,  
The little nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love.’

Those are what we look upon as little things all along. It is the hillocks which we have magnified into mountains that resume their proper dimensions in the landscape. He sounds the trumpet-call to action, but he restores us to that state of mental health which is the condition of any action worth taking. Things that are petty, and paltry, and mean, sordid personal motives and selfish cares, lose the sham

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significance with which we have invested them ; in the presence of the Infinite we bow our heads and feel the blessing. And when we rise again to face the struggle anew, we do so with clearer perceptions, purer aims ; looking forward through the battle-smoke to the infinite peace beyond, the

‘central peace, subsisting at the heart  
Of endless agitation.’

In the early stages of life, no doubt, one is inclined to be rather impatient : not over-anxious about seeing things in their true proportions ; not, indeed, greatly desirous of peace at all. There is joy in fighting for its own sake.

‘Then Gareth, “Here be rules. I know but one—  
To dash against mine enemy, and to win.”’

And Gareth was a very valiant youth, and won a scornful damsel’s heart by his valiancy ; all the same, he did not understand the noble art of demolishing his enemies quite so well as Lancelot. But one likes him all the better for his

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

**IDEAS AND IDEALS** impetuosity. And it must be confessed that Wordsworth does not encourage impetuosity; therefore the elder folk love him, and the younger folk do after the manner of young folk, and are something disposed to 'put him by.'

The influence of Tennyson is chiefly felt in his power of stirring those softer emotions which the everyday lives of most of us call or ought to call into constant play. The kindly affections of kinsfolk and friends, the chivalry of the strong towards the weak: the beauty of these things and the ugliness of their opposites are what he most loves to dwell on, and dwells on with most success. His phases are so various that curiously opposite criticisms are often passed upon him. One critic cannot tolerate his pessimism (having in mind, I suppose, such pieces as the second 'Locksley Hall'), while another complains of his 'rose-water optimism'; one applauds his noble ideals, while another sneers at his country-parsonage ethics. Country-parsonage ethics are

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no such contemptible matter, but they IDEAS AND  
are apt to be framed within limited IDEALS  
horizons, and to leave us stranded and  
without a guide when unexpected comp-  
lications appear. Hence we are some  
of us a little apt to forget that life is  
mostly made up of the minor relations,  
and that living harmoniously in them  
will occupy most of our time, if our  
lives are to be profitable to ourselves or  
to anybody else. Now and then we  
are brought up face to face with some  
great problem, suddenly and awfully  
thrust upon us ; a part of the riddle of  
our own lives, which must be unravelled,  
instead of a vague something of which  
we may be content with supposing  
there is a vague solution somewhere ;  
and it seems to me that for the hardest  
problems of the younger generation—  
the problems which they feel to be for  
them the most pressing—Tennyson fails  
to provide the key ; whereas he did  
supply just the key which the previous  
generation wanted. The movement of  
science, of criticism, of democracy, has

## SEERS AND SINGERS:

IDEAS AND IDEALS produced new conditions which do not affect the mental attitude of people who had made up their minds before these complications arose, but which do make all the difference to those who are still occupied in making up their minds. When the new facts have been brought into line with the old truths, it is likely enough—though prophesying be vanity—that Tennyson will recover much of the ground which it seems that he is losing to-day. But, as it is, the problems are apt to take a form in which his aid is deficient.

Therefore it is not in the great crises of our lives that we turn to the Laureate; unless it be in the hour of anguish when some great blow has so prostrated us that the process of recuperation must be very gradual and slow, when we are too weak for a more stimulating medicine. But what may be called his everyday ideals are singularly beautiful; to a certain type of mind, more attractive and inspiring than any other, and perhaps demanding most attention pre-

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cisely from that other type of mind IDEAS AND  
which inclines to make light of them— IDEALS  
the type in which energy not seldom becomes turbidity, and tenderness is often taken for weakness; one which the intellectual turmoil of to-day has made rather common. The dignity, the loyalty, the chivalrous self-suppression and large-hearted pitifulness, to fail in which meant failure in all to the Knights of the Round Table, are not qualities to be lightly scorned, or even to be set on one side as mere social graces. The simulation of them is contemptible enough, but their essence is the spirit of self-sacrifice. No doubt there are artificial flowers in the market, but the wilding hedge-rose is not the less lovely.

But there are fiercer temptations, sharper emotions, sterner trials to be faced than those in which Tennyson most avails us. To some people they hardly come at all, to most at very rare intervals. And, partly for that reason, the poet who has dealt with

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IDEAS AND IDEALS them most habitually, most courageously, most truly, finds comparatively few readers ; because either you must have experienced those emotions yourself — and that depends mainly upon outside circumstances — or you must have the imaginative capacity for *really* realising their existence in other people before you can understand the poet's treatment of them. That has a good deal to do with Browning's 'unintelligibility' ; in spite of which, whatever Browning's permanent position in literature may be, he appears to me to be emphatically now, at least for the younger generation, the most valuable moral and intellectual force of the century.

Even with this limitation to a particular generation, that is making a pretty strong statement : especially when a section of the said younger generation is engaged in relegating Browning to the category of intellectual gymnasts, and inviting us to draw our inspiration from the superior sanity, force, and insight of—

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Ibsen. If any one finds himself the IDEAS AND better for reading Ibsen, by all means IDEALS let him read ; but to claim him as the truest guide, philosopher, and friend for a humanity which wants perhaps more than anything else to be assured that life is worth going through with, sympathy worth feeling, and pain worth enduring, has a certain absurdity about it.

For the key to Browning lies in the intensity of his conviction that life is worth living just because pain is worth suffering.

- For what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
- For the fulness of the days? Have we withered and agonised?
- Why else was the pause prolonged, but that singing might issue thence?
- Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized ?'

We start on life's journey with all the sanguine pride of youth ; others have failed, but the victory will be reserved for us ! And then, alas, when the looked-for fruit does not drop into our out-

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**IDEAS AND IDEALS** stretched hands, or it may be we find that the tree is guarded by a very pestilent dragon on which we can make no ostensible impression at all, whereas it can, and does, make a very disagreeable impression on us—then we sometimes begin to despair. Failure is very disheartening ; and when we begin further to conclude that on the whole failure is the rule, not the exception—to

'Look at the end of work, contrast  
The petty done, the undone vast,  
This present of theirs with the hopeful past'—

the natural man turns pessimistic. But Browning felt all this to the full, and it did not make a pessimist of him. Now, there is a certain kind of optimism which under the consciousness of failure we find merely enraging—the optimism of the 'successful' man who, because he has aimed low, has reached his mark, and is thoroughly contented ; who is unconscious that all success is so far failure that there must ever be a beyond. This is the optimism which does not

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even know that there is an ideal ; it is IDEAS AND  
blankly unsympathetic from sheer want IDEALS  
of imagination. But there is another  
kind of optimism : the optimism of one  
who knows what failure means, has  
tasted the bitterness of the bitter drink,  
has felt the sting with all its keen-  
ness ; the optimism that refuses to be  
daunted. And this is possible only  
as the outcome of a very intense con-  
viction that 'tis not what man does  
which exalts him, but what man would  
do ; failure is in the 'things done,  
that took the eye, and had the price' ;  
and the things done are of small  
account at best.

'What I aspired to be  
And was not comforts me ;  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i'  
the scale.'

To have an ideal and to strive after  
it at any cost of suffering, and, if it  
prove actually attainable, to realise a  
new ideal beyond and above ; so seek-  
ing always something higher than that

## S E E R S A N D S I N G E R S :

IDEAS AND to which we have attained, and, whether  
IDEALS we achieve or not, to go on striving—

‘Tis but to keep the nerves at a strain,  
Dry one’s eyes and laugh at a fall,  
And, baffled, get up and begin again ;  
So the chase takes up one’s life—that’s all’—

this is what makes life worth having, and without this it is a poor sort of affair. And with Browning this conviction rested on other convictions so vigorously and intensely expressed, so vitally bound up with everything that he spoke most convincingly, that one can only stand amazed at the suggestion, which has been soberly made by admirable but surprising persons, that he is a ‘dangerous’ writer. This is not, however, either the time or the place to enter on a discussion of Browning’s theological ideas.

Browning’s life was a long one ; for him, as for Wordsworth, the struggle too was long, and the defeats many ; but in ‘the fulness of the days’ the triumph came to him. The epilogue to

## A STUDY OF FIVE POETS

'*Adolando*' was indeed a fitting legacy IDEAS AND IDEALS to mankind from the strongest, the most dauntless soul that our times have known. In those last lines he summed up what he was, and what he has done for us and helped us to be :

‘One who never turned his back, but marched  
breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed though right were worsted wrong  
might triumph,  
Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.’

Through the veil we greet him, with  
the greeting he himself taught us ·

‘<sup>¶</sup>Strive and thrive!’ cry “Speed,—fight on, fare  
ever  
There as here! ”’











